

# MILD MENTAL RETARDATION: MYTH AND REALITY

ROBIN JACKSON

King Alfred's College of Higher Education, Winchester

Why has mental retardation been so consistently ignored as a legitimate area of study by sociologists? And what have been some of the possible consequences of this neglect? One explanation for this selective inattention has been provided by Dexter (1958) who has suggested that the development of sociology has to a large extent been guided by considerations of the effect of socio-environmental differences upon personality and intergroup relationships. Thus subjects—like mental retardation—which do not appear to fit into this approach, no matter how significant in themselves, tend to be overlooked.

Dexter identifies four particular reasons for this neglect. First, topics which do not match existing theories which have come to be accepted as true, plausible or "natural" tend to be unconsciously ignored. Second, a prevailing theory tends to attract to it those with a particular ideological bent. Therefore, topics which do not seem compatible with the methodology and its implicit or explicit ideology tend to be put to one side or openly ridiculed. For example, the fact that sociologists tend to interpret human behaviour in democratic, egalitarian and non-genetic terms leads them to reject any notion of inherent inequality and biological conditioning of human behaviour. Third, notwithstanding the many possibilities which sociological and anthropological interpretations of behaviour have opened up, it is difficult to "explain" or "explain away" differences in mental endowment of individuals without at the same time questioning the value and validity of the system of universal competition which confers status and legitimacy on the sociologists themselves! Fourth, the exaggerated significance of a topic in one generation may lead to its neglect in succeeding generations. The over-simplified genetic interpretation of mental retardation which characterised thinking at the beginning of this century may explain the continuing scepticism and hostility towards any theories that appear to re-state these earlier formulations.

The main consequence of this continuing neglect has been the difficulty of disentangling fiction from fact, myth from reality. Let us start then with a few facts. First, there are one million mentally retarded in Britain. Second, for every one person that is severely retarded, there are nine who are mildly retarded. Third, the severely retarded owe their condition to bio-medical causes that are usually identifiable before, at, or shortly after, birth. They are drawn from the whole social class spectrum, tend to score below 50 on IQ tests, are profoundly or severely impaired in adaptive behaviour, usually have additional disabilities, are rarely capable of holding a job in open employment or able to maintain themselves independently in the community. Fourth, the mildly retarded are drawn almost exclusively from the most impoverished sector of society, a fact that has encouraged the belief that they owe their condition more to environmental than to bio-medical or other causes. They tend to score between 50 and 70 on IQ tests, are usually impaired in adaptive behaviour, often have additional disabilities, are generally capable of holding a job in open employment and are able to maintain themselves independently in the community. Finally, the public image or stereotype of the mentally retarded tends to be based on the observable characteristics of the minority population—the severely retarded.

That severe retardation usually originates from a specific organic impairment is not questioned. What is challenged is the popular belief, which masquerades as an

unassailable fact, that mild retardation is a recent social phenomenon—a cultural artefact found only in modern industrial societies. This view is frequently encountered in general texts on mental retardation. A typical example is provided by Shakespeare (1975) in her book, "The Psychology of Handicap":

"It has been found that the likelihood of a person being designated as 'mentally handicapped' is affected by the culture in which he lives. In a fast-moving, highly industrialised, competitive setting, inability to cope is more likely to become obvious than in less demanding surroundings, so more people are likely to be seen as handicapped."

Those who argue that socio-cultural factors are pre-eminent in the causation of mild retardation usually content themselves with the recognition that the overwhelming majority of the mildly retarded are drawn from the poorest districts of our towns and cities. This fact has encouraged some writers to conclude that had it not been for these adverse environmental conditions most mildly retarded would have reached the same range of intellectual ability as persons not classified as mildly retarded (Hurley, 1969; Brolin, 1976). One clear implication of this belief is that given appropriate and timely intervention on a large enough scale and over a sufficiently long period, there is a strong likelihood that the prevalence of mild retardation could be reduced. There is little substance for this popular belief. For all the brilliant forensic skill so recently shown by Kamin (1974) in demolishing much of the argument of Burt and his disciples for the key role played by genetics in the determination of intelligence, neither Kamin nor anyone else has yet provided convincing proof that low mental ability is the result of socio-cultural factors.

The real value of Kamin's study, however, lies in showing the close mesh between science and ideology and in illustrating so clearly the difficulties experienced by social scientists in developing theoretical positions divorced from their firmly held personal beliefs, values, prejudices and preferences. The reluctance of many social scientists and educators at the present time even to concede the possibility that mild retardation may have a significant genetic component provides an illustration of the blinkering effect that ideology can exercise over scientific outlook.

There are, however, a whole range of other equally dubious assumptions concerning the nature of mild retardation which merit close examination:

**(1) That mild retardation is essentially a social phenomenon peculiar to Western industrial societies.** This characteristically ethnocentric view necessarily ignores available anthropological evidence which suggests that mild retardation may well be a pancultural phenomenon. Edgerton (1968), for example, has demonstrated that the mildly retarded have been recognised as a distinct social group in "primitive" societies. He has shown that a number of tribes in East Africa, the Pokot of northern Kenya, the Kamba of central Kenya and the Hehe of southern Tanzania, all draw a distinction not only between normal and retarded but between severely and mildly retarded! Margaret Mead (1960), in her discussion of the Manus of the Admiralty Islands, north of New Guinea, observed that they were "quick to brand the stupid, the slow learner, the man or woman with poor memory." Other material from anthropological studies can be adduced to challenge the notion that mild retardation is a phenomenon exclusive to Western societies.

Nevertheless, the confident assertion has recently been made that the cultural component in the recognition and definition of intelligence can be clearly seen when cultures are contrasted (Squibb, 1973). However, the author fails to provide any empirical support for this categorical declaration. Instead the reader has to make

do with a number of overdrawn **hypothetical** examples! Squibb's presumption that substantial differences in the definition of intelligence do exist between cultures without attempting to look for and examine any evidence would seem a revealing oversight. It is particularly ironic that Squibb, like Kamin, should draw the reader's attention to the strong relationship often found between the "findings" of scientific (sic) research and the prejudices of the researchers!

(2) **That the intellectual and social skills required to survive in a pre-literate/pre-industrial society were significantly less demanding than the skills required to survive in an industrial society.** As Edgerton (1968) has indicated, it is frequently assumed that the mildly retarded are what they are because of the social demands, particularly the educational and intellectual demands, of our modern world. While such a view may seem plausible, we should guard against assuming that those we regard as mildly retarded in our society would necessarily be socially competent in simpler, non-literate societies. The reality is that survival in simple societies is a far more complex and difficult process than is commonly supposed. This point has been underlined by Edgerton, who has stressed that even the least elegant cultures establish forms of inter-personal conduct that require no little subtlety, tact, deceit and verbal skill—traits which may be **more** highly valued among primitives than they are in our Western world. In addition, the economic requirements of such societies are also seldom simple. For example, in Africa an ordinary man may be required to know the names of hundreds of cows, their genealogies, histories and worth, as well as the details of innumerable deals involving people, animals and land. Edgerton's conclusion deserves careful consideration: "I have met no one in our society who is mildly retarded, who could live competently in one of these African cultures even if he had years to learn the way of that culture."

The fact that the mildly retarded have been identified as distinct groups in contemporary primitive societies does suggest the strong probability that they existed as an identifiable population in pre-industrial Britain. Historical accounts which describe the composition of the expanding pauper population in Tudor times certainly suggest that many were mildly retarded. The common belief that pre-industrial Britain was a simple rural society in which few intellectual and social demands were made on the individual and that rural communities were more cohesive and interdependent, more tolerant and sympathetic towards the handicapped and less susceptible to the social ills that beset the cities probably results from the heavily romanticised and idyllic picture of rural life so assiduously fostered by some Victorian writers. It is conveniently forgotten that the domestic system which preceded the factory system also occasioned widespread distress. Child labour, starvation through lack of work, crippling sickness and a wide variety of malpractices by employers were common. Industrialised society forced communities to face on a large scale what had often been the isolated problem for the individual and his family (Midwinter, 1969).

The extent to which myth can influence and confuse present thinking is exemplified by Tizard's (1975) recent proposal that in devising a new and comprehensive service for the handicapped we should return to the more primitive concept of the village or commune, "which accepts its members as they are, old or young, able or dull, fleet of foot or lame." That this is no more than a ritualistic genuflection to a mythical past is made apparent by Tizard's immediate qualification that it is unlikely that any communities actually exhibited this degree of tolerance and understanding! One is then left puzzling how one can return to a type of community that never existed. What Tizard appears to be advocating is the creation of a totally new kind of community, not a recreation of a past model of doubtful authenticity that has since become extinct.

Equally ill-founded is the belief that mild retardation was a product of industrialised society. That is to say, that it arose as a consequence of the processes of **industrialisation** which placed a premium on the possession of specific marketable skills, **urbanisation** which demanded new social skills to survive in the more complex and competitive environment of the city, **modernisation** which necessitated an understanding of, and ability to work with, an increasing number of technological innovations and **compulsory education** which required children to be proficient in a restricted range of intellectual skills. This simplistic view ignores the fact that (1) nineteenth century industry deliberately sought and was for a long time dependent on those with **least skills**—children, women and the poor, (2) Britain was an urbanised society long before the “industrial revolution,” (3) many of the technological innovations simplified rather than complicated existing industrial and commercial processes, and (4) compulsory school attendance confirmed rather than revealed the extent of retardation among the child population.

The notion that the advent of modern industrial society weakened the competitive position of the less able has been challenged by Goode (1967), who has argued that one reason why Western industrial societies are more productive than any previous social system is because they utilise the less able more efficiently. He notes that the two most significant tools of industrial society, the rationalised bureaucracy and the factory, tend to protect rather than expose the less able. Both systems are based on a high division of labour with fairly precise definitions of task. The skills necessary to carry out most jobs can be acquired by a wide range of people of varying talent. While some people will be much less competent to perform certain jobs than others, the machine and bureaucratic systems tend to lower the chance of catastrophic failure by the less competent. In other words, both systems are structurally capable of tolerating a high measure of inefficiency and low productivity.

There is no contradiction in the fact that modern industrial societies are achievement-oriented, yet the less able in such societies manage to survive. While achievement norms may have an important influence on behaviour within industrial societies, they do not dictate behaviour. Any society which rigorously applied the norms of performance to the actions of all its members would under most circumstances destroy itself. Thus the fact that a society is achievement-oriented does not preclude it from recognising certain obligations to those poorly equipped to compete. The reality is that most Western industrial societies are welfare states dedicated to humanitarian ideals and committed to supporting extensive and costly programmes specifically designed to meet the needs of the less able.

(3) **That mild retardation is perceived as a social problem only in Western industrial societies.** Dexter (1962) has pointed out that all societies can, if they wish, create their own social problems. To illustrate his argument he presents us with an interesting analogy. We are asked to imagine a society in which the major target group of social discrimination is composed of the clumsy people—“the gawkies.” This is because such a society stresses grace and style in much the same way as we stress intellectual skill. People are taught to abhor clumsiness in the same way that most people in our society are taught to abhor stupidity. A style of writing is devised which can only be mastered by those who are graceful, and the technology of the society is such that a high degree of grace and skill are necessary to run its machines. The schools in such a social system would stress movement, dancing and rhythmic. The psychometric institutes would develop an elaborate vocabulary and even more sophisticated test instruments for distinguishing between manifest grace and inherent potentiality for grace of movement. Naturally, too, clumsy children would become social rejects and isolates, and instead of jokes about the stupid, there would be jokes directed against the gawky.

In other words, Dexter is suggesting that like gawkiness, mild retardation has become a social problem because of the needs of our particular society. Although he does not actually say that mild retardation would be no problem if it were not for the emphasis we place upon intellectual skill, he does suggest that it would be much less of a problem. This kind of argument needs to be treated with caution. First, while societies obviously have the potential to make anything into a social problem, it does not follow that most do. In fact, quite different societies tend to choose identical areas as being problematic. Second, while societies may be free to create their own problems, they have no power to unmake the kind of social problems which are common to all societies, for example, problems associated with sexuality and aggression. Third, the possibility is entertained but not substantiated by Dexter that some societies may fail to define mild retardation as a social problem.

However, as Edgerton has pointed out, there must be some intellectual threshold—some level of retardation—below which no one can fall and still claim to be a competent member of any society. In view of the fact that pancultural uniformities have been found in the patterns of cognitive functioning between primitive and advanced societies, it is possible that disparate societies may well draw similar thresholds. Thus those identified as mildly retarded and perceived as problematic in one society may be similarly regarded in another quite different society. Paradoxically, the mildly retarded may constitute an even greater social problem in primitive societies than our own. Edgerton cites the case of a Sebei father in Uganda who laments the fact that his son is too stupid to inherit his herds of cattle and thus would have no heir, no social security in his old age and little prestige.

The fact that the mildly retarded in African societies rarely marry also poses an acute problem for their families, as the family cannot achieve either wealth or security if its children do not marry. Another reason why mild retardation is usually a serious social problem in many primitive societies is because there is a corporate responsibility for any wrongdoing. Not only is the family held responsible for any misdemeanour by a retarded member, but the entire clan is implicated. Therefore, clan members are assigned to supervise the retarded in order to keep them out of trouble. In extreme cases, the retarded are confined to the house. These two "primitive" responses, supervision and confinement to the house, bear a striking similarity to those adopted in more advanced societies—sheltered provision and institutionalisation.

Unlike many primitive societies, Victorian Britain felt no sense of societal responsibility for the retarded. On the contrary, they were seen as a parasitic and predatory population responsible for most of the social ills that ravaged the cities—poverty, crime, alcoholism, drug addiction, vagrancy and prostitution. In addition, they were seen as a threat to social order and the genetic purity of the race. The lack of compassion shown towards the retarded is perhaps understandable when set against the dominant philosophical, religious, scientific and popular views of the time. The impact of Darwin's theory of evolution, when translated into Social Darwinism by Spenser, encouraged the belief that the retarded were the biologically "unfit." Acceptance of the Malthusian doctrine that there was an optimal population for every society led many to believe that the apparently higher reproductive capacity of the retarded constituted a threat to the nation's stability and welfare. The Benthamite principle of self-help popularised by Samuel Smiles ("Heaven helps those who help themselves"), laid the onus on the individual to make good. Thus the retarded, who were perceived as constitutionally incapable of helping themselves, gained little sympathy. Finally, the influence of conflicting religious beliefs encouraged either a fatalistic or condemnatory attitude towards the plight of the retarded.

A Victorian observing the squalor of the cities, the unchecked escalation in crime, the extent of poverty among the urban population, the growing frequency of massive epidemics of cholera, typhoid and smallpox, and the increasing social disorder and unrest, might be forgiven for feeling uneasy and for trying to find a cause for the existing social malaise. Predictably the underlying cause—the demographic explosion—was ignored. As often happens when a society is confronted by uncertainty, tension and conflict, the “scapegoat principle” is invoked. The kind of proposals advanced by British scientists and social reformers to counter the “menace” of the retarded—segregation, castration, sterilisation and euthanasia—bear a depressing similarity in intent and character to the measures taken against another minority group—the Jews in Nazi Germany. The close identification of the eugenics movement with these proposals for a **final solution** may help to explain why any suggestion that mild retardation may be a consequence of inferior mental endowment is still viewed with abhorrence and why social scientists are reluctant to give serious consideration to it for fear of being branded a reactionary—or worse!

(4) **That in pre-literate/pre-industrial societies the retarded were either not stigmatised at all or not stigmatised to the same extent as in Western societies.** Once again the truth would seem to lie in the opposite direction. Edgerton has demonstrated not only that the mildly retarded have been subjected to overt discrimination in many small societies in Asia, the Americas and Africa, but that they tend to be **more** rather than less stigmatised in such societies. The view which is also commonly expressed that pre-industrial societies may have recognised the mildly retarded as a distinct group but not subjected them to discriminatory treatment is equally unpersuasive. As Wolfensberger (1970) has observed, in discussing societal attitudes toward the retarded: “It is difficult to the point of impossibility for society at the same time to view people as deviant and interact normally with them.” Ample and convincing proof for this assertion is provided in Goffman’s (1968) essay, “Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity.”

An examination of Western European folklore, literature and drama since the Middle Ages would also reveal that the retarded have been traditionally cast in the role of the fool. A role, paradoxically, that is both depreciated and valued. The fact that the role of fool has been institutionalised in comedy and perpetuated in folklore suggests to Klapp (1949) that the fool performs a number of essential functions within the organisation of all social groups. That’s to say, all societies may need persons to play the role of fool. For example, the sanction of ridicule may be used as means of enforcing status reduction—by cutting people down to size, and as a device for ensuring social control—by exposing an individual’s failure to meet group norms. Klapp also makes it clear that the kind of strategies which are open to an individual to escape the role of fool are usually denied to the retarded because of their lack of social sensitivity and tactical awareness. In other words, the retarded find it difficult both “to pass” (i.e., to lay claim to normal status and have that claim accepted) and to disavow, conceal or otherwise disguise their deviant status. Thus, for the retarded, the status of fool is likely to be permanent.

## **Conclusion**

If in order to maintain norms and social cohesion all societies do require individuals to play the role of fool, and if most societies are able to identify the mildly retarded and to categorise them as fools, and if there is no way for the retarded to escape the label and attendant stigma, then we have to face a number of unpalatable facts which have hitherto been ignored.

A number of other harsh truths need also to be faced. First, if available anthropological evidence demonstrating the universality of the phenomenon of mild

retardation is endorsed by future research, then the conventional wisdom that mild retardation is to a large extent a consequence of environmental factors is seriously challenged. Second, if mild retardation has a strong genetic component, then not only will all attempts to reduce the prevalence of mild retardation through environmental engineering prove fruitless, but all efforts to achieve significant improvements in the intellectual functioning of the mildly retarded through specialised schooling will prove disappointing. Third, even if it was established that mild retardation was largely environmentally induced, the sociological reality would still remain that the retarded would continue to be identified, labelled and stigmatised.

If this somewhat pessimistic analysis is correct, one can understand why sociologists have shown such a strong and persistent disinclination to study mental retardation. Social phenomena that cannot be easily explained or explained away by existing sociological theory may well be ignored or suppressed for fear that they may weaken some of the fundamental beliefs on which the discipline is based.

### References

- Brolin, D. F. (1976). *Vocational Preparation of Retarded Citizens*. Columbus: Merrill.
- Dexter, L. A. (1958). A note on selective inattention in social science. *Social Problems*, 6, 176-172.
- Dexter, L. A. (1962). On the politics and sociology of stupidity in our society. *Social Problems*, 9, 221-228.
- Edgerton, R. B. (1968). Anthropology and mental retardation: a plea for the comparative study of incompetence. In Prehm, H. J. et al (Eds.). *Behavioural Research in Mental Retardation*. Rehabilitation Research and Training Centre in Mental Retardation Monograph No. 1. University of Oregon.
- Goffman, E. (1968). *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. London: Penguin.
- Goode, W. J. (1967). The protection of the inept. *American Sociological Review*, 32, 5-19.
- Hurley, R. (1969). *Poverty and Mental Retardation*. New York: Random House.
- Kamin, L. J. (1974). *The Science and Politics of IQ*. New York: Wiley.
- Klapp, O. E. (1949). The fool as a social type. *American Journal of Sociology*, 55, 157-162.
- Mead, M. (1960). *Growing Up in New Guinea*. New York: Mentor.
- Midwinter, E. C. (1969). *Victorian Social Reform*. London: Longman.
- Shakespeare, R. (1975). *The Psychology of Handicap*. London: Methuen.
- Squibb, P. G. (1973). The concept of intelligence—a sociological perspective. *Sociological Review*, 21, 57-75.
- Tizard, J. (1975). The future place of the handicapped in society. In Loring, J. and Burn, G. (Eds.). *Integration of Handicapped Children in Society*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Wolfensberger, W. (1970). Models of mental retardation. *New Society*, 51-53. 8 Jan.