

COMMENTS ON ROBIN JACKSON'S PAPER "Mild Mental Retardation: Myth and Reality"

Robin Jackson's paper on "Mild Mental Retardation: Myth and Reality," is a fascinating document, although its aim is not clear: whether to explore a sociological type of neglect or to demonstrate that the phenomenon of mental retardation is identically perceived in all societies.

He delivers a sharp attack upon the concept that intellectual and social skills required to survive in a pre-literate and pre-industrial society were sociologically less demanding than the skills required to survive in an industrial society. The reality is that survival in simple societies is far more difficult than is commonly understood. Furthermore, the common belief that pre-industrial Britain was a simple rural society in which few intellectual and social demands were made, and that rural communities were more cohesive and interdependent than present society he regards as a heavily reminiscent and idyllic picture of rural life. This can hardly be argued against. There is simply no evidence to support it. Yet a great deal of our thinking about the integration of the handicapped is based upon the assumption that in the idyllic past the kindly idiot was regarded as no different from anyone else and is the sort of model upon which so much of our thinking is based. Certainly the pastoral mythology deserves to be punctured. Moreover, it is worth noting that the fool or the village idiot confer rôles from which the retarded person can relate to the community. However, the contemporary problem is largely one of rôlelessness.

He is on much shakier ground in countering the proposition that mild retardation is perceived as a social problem only in western industrialised societies, partly because of his dubious use of the term, "social problem." Can sexuality and aggression really be described as universal social problems, and if they are so defined then the anthropological evidence indicates that social problems vary widely. Read Margaret Mead and Samoan sexuality. The proposition that "disparate societies may draw similar thresholds" of competence and retardation is very shaky.

Jackson also claims that it is a fact that there are a million mentally retarded in Britain, but fails to state who has defined them, and by what criteria.

To sum up, it is true that because of genetic defects or damage before and during birth some individuals are equipped with limited potential to develop cognitive skills. Most or all society identifies some individuals as falling below the required levels of adult competence. But there is no culture-free measurement of cognitive potential, and even if there were it is highly unlikely that varying societies would define the limits of acceptability as being in the same place. After all, even families vary in their definitions within one society. So the case is spoiled by overstating it.

Nevertheless, it is an important contribution to the all-too-scarce literature about the sociological aspects of mental retardation.

JAMES LORING,
The Spastics Society, London.