

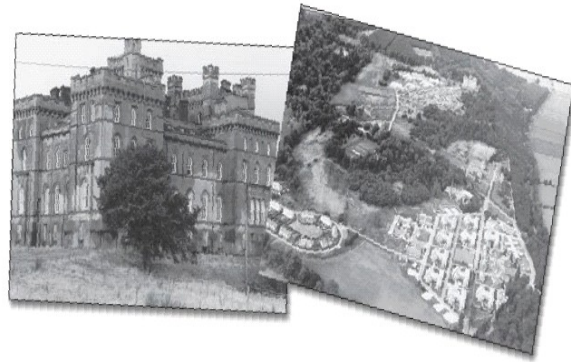
## **Rank, Power and Health: The missing gifts & contributions of people with learning disability labels.**

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This article was written after our joint presentation with Pierre Morin<sup>1</sup> at the Worldwork Seminar in London, April 2008, where we explored issues of health, rank and privilege. Many people asked us to explain and outline in more detail the history that people labelled as having a learning disability or intellectual impairment have faced and how the history continues to impact on the health and well-being of so many people around the world. As this narrative is often marginalised and hidden we have taken a few pages to summarise that and to put it into the context of current rank and health differences.

In Scotland, as in many other countries and for hundreds of years a massive exclusion has left communities impoverished and damaged. Those deemed too broken, not perfect enough or too crazy to be in the mainstream have been institutionalised, segregated and excluded in asylums, hospitals and other institutions.

We are still learning about the effects of this exclusion. Not only about those directly affected but also how this loss affects everyone, because we have all been denied the company and contributions of the people who might have been friends, family, neighbours and work colleagues. And as more and more people who were previously excluded are now taking their rightful places in community, it seems we are half-way between a change from the exclusions of the past to a future that we can't quite see yet.



Wolfensberger (1969), Foucault (1961) and many others noted the significance of cultural myths in shaping the lives of people who have learning difficulties or intellectual impairments over the past two hundred years. People were often seen in a very poor light by our ancestors, perhaps as less fit, second class citizens, genetically tainted, a danger to the gene pool or 'race purity' and even as a threat to the structure of society. Because of the enlightenment ideals; the rise of rationality from within the scientific and industrial paradigms of the 19th century, people who were seen as poles apart from the rational, physically fit and

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.creativehealing.org/>

healthy ideal. Those deemed and labelled as unfit, feeble or even morally weak were consigned to institutions. Forced sterilisation was the result for many, while others were subject to inhumane treatment or sometimes deliberately killed or consigned to an early death. The photo (above right) is of Lennox Castle Hospital (closed only recently) which had a population of 2100 long term residents at its peak; citizens of Glasgow taken from their families, friends and neighbourhoods, sometimes for life.

The beliefs held in the past are still present in the unconscious thinking in our society and also in the legal and institutional patterns that shape how people who have such labels are still treated. This means that people are likely to be getting poorer health care in the National Health Service in the U.K. than other citizens, as they experience a much higher likelihood of misdiagnoses. And although disability hate crime is now a term in legal use in the U.K., only a very few strikingly obvious hate crimes are categorized as such, perhaps because of continued institutional disable-ism in the police and legal systems.

So there are structural issues in our society that directly effect the lives, well being and physical and mental health of people with labels of learning disability. There are other issues that combine to seriously effect the relevant social rank of people with learning disabilities.

### **Low Rank Problems**

Social rank is a term coined by Arnold Mindell (1995). Rank is a term that describes one's power to act in particular situations. It can be defined as the sum of one's privileges in a given moment or context. Commonly described in Process Work as the sum of different privileges, one's awareness of one's rank in the moment can benefit both parties.

- Social privileges are those that are dependent on the society the person lives in (examples might be the privileges that arise because of the education a person has had, the class they were born into or married into, the financial wealth they have, their gender, ethnic group and so on.)
- Structural privileges arise though a person's rank or standing within an organisation's hierarchy, whether it is the bowling club committee or a top one hundred company executive.
- Psychological privileges arise from the personal state of the person (or the usual state) An example of this is the when someone who feels good about themselves because they are in love may have more confidence in some situations than usual. Other ways of identifying psychological rank and privilege is how a person gets up in the morning, feeling optimistic or less despairing, or perhaps the person is on good terms with their personal

history or family situation, has good relationships with children and partner, and so on, or perhaps they have a lot of psychological awareness and are aware of their own strengths and gifts. Perhaps they have a lot of psychological awareness because of the skills they have had to develop as a result of abuse, neglect or traumatic experiences in their past

- Health privileges are also important. Someone who identifies as healthy and fit compared with someone who feels weak and/or has considerable pain to cope with will have a different stamina and concentration in relationships.
- Spiritual privilege, describes ones sense of connectedness to a higher power. This may or may not mean a personal God; it could be a sense of an ideal or philosophy or a connection to a sense of the spiritual world.

This view of 'privilege' has proved useful in how it opens up a way to understand how our interactions are organised, even though the people involved may be unaware of the dynamics that operate in that relationship. It is clear from this perspective that many people with learning disabilities and other labels are accorded low social rank in our society. This effect also has an inward direction as a form of internalised oppression when the person with a learning disability label believes themselves to be broken, stupid<sup>1</sup> or useless and so will resist attempts to change this. However, if we only consider social rank issues we put to the side other ways in which rank and privilege are given and accepted.

### **What can be done to address these rank and privilege issues.**

Like everyone else in society, people with learning disabilities have qualities and gifts (O'Brien). When these are denied, unseen or dismissed then this is painful (Shakespeare). Being seen as needful or treated as useless puts people into devalued social roles which become self-fulfilling (Kendrick). For example, if one is treated as useless and 'stupid' then it is hard to believe in oneself and this can lead to the appearance of the so called 'stupidity' that was consciously or unconsciously expected of you anyhow.

Alternatively, making contributions to the lives and well-being of others, to one's family and neighbours, businesses and community groups leads directly to increased self esteem and a socially valued role. This enters a positive circle of building psychological and sometimes spiritual rank. As a result much of the work that 'works' is to simply support people to have jobs, to volunteer, to find ways in which they can make a difference to others.

This means firstly representing people differently so that others in society can see them in a new light and clearly for who they really are. Secondly this means

helping the person who is labelled as learning disabled to see themselves as a person who can really learn or can teach others.

Also as therapists we work with individuals to help them discover their own power, wisdom, skills and gifts. Many people are wounded (Wolfensberger) and will have had abusive or neglectful experiences. Those responsible for these past hurts may still live within the person as dream figures even though the original perpetrators may be long gone. Working with these parts of the psyche in therapy helps the person to follow their own personal growth process which may very well be to take on a different role in relation to the 'oppressor', so that they can stand up for themselves and see themselves more for who they really are.

Also, many people labelled as learning disabled have particular skills and sets of skills that are needed in society. Not being able to read or write well<sup>2</sup> is a handicap in a digital and information age but many other skills are marginalised by mainstream beliefs of what it means to be smart. Yet these other qualities are sorely needed in the world. For example, when we think of friends who have these labels we are reminded of the gifts they have, like those of honesty and straightforwardness, gifts like this are like a breath of fresh air. Then there are the gifts of warmth and unconditional positive regard that another person has. Another friend has very refined skills of discernment that means they can unerringly detect incongruence in other people. Another person can listen very clearly, another has the gift of loyalty and of making other people feel appreciated.



These are not just good qualities that are being projected onto a group of people so that we can feel better about them but these are real and actual qualities missing in our society and that are desperately needed. In the process of marginalising our own sense of weakness or stupidity (and thereby projecting that disavowed part of ourselves onto a whole group of people) we have excluded other deeply needed qualities from ourselves and our society. Casting away these qualities as if they were some kind of unconscious sacrifice to the god of rationality

A lot of the most helpful work is to help the person discover their skills and gifts and then to find ways in which they can use them. Everyone needs to know where they are needed and what for (O'Brien).

### **What every citizen can do.**

Any easy mistake that we all make, is to patronise. Patronising behaviour results from not seeing the whole of a person but instead we notice just that which is

immediate in its impact (from a social rank viewpoint) so that we see the other as less than us. Concentrating our focus only on the neediness, weakness or vulnerability that society projects onto people labelled in this way continues this oppression. Remembering that people are potential contributors to society is a start in the opposite direction. Imagining the ways in which our society is impoverished because it excludes qualities that the person with a learning disability has is another positive step we can all make.

If you are part of a community or neighbourhood body or association then look around and see if people with learning disabilities are present as members or as trustees or board members. If you are an employer consider how someone could add skills into your workforce and how also their very presence, character and personality might benefit everyone else in your organisation or company.

### **Ways in which we work at Diversity Matters.**

Diversity Matters acts in partnership with other organisations in Scotland like Altrum (an umbrella organisation that fosters inclusive societies , organisations and groups).

- We provide individual Therapy and or work with families and the whole system around a person
- We offer facilitation where there is conflict between individuals, families and the social/health system.



*At a Community Forum in the West of Scotland*

- We run Open Forums to help build more diverse communities and localities.
- We consult around organisational change for NGO's, Social and Health services
- We support new cutting edge organisations to develop new services

[www.diversity-matters.co.uk](http://www.diversity-matters.co.uk)

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1The words “stupid” or “stupidity” are used deliberately in this article to bring to consciousness the frequent and very real experiences of people who are thought about like this and taunted with this projection all their life.

2Although it is true that many people with learning disability labels have difficulties with skills like reading, it is not true for all and there are many types of impairment. Some people labelled as learning disabled will be poets, writers, musicians, orators, future leaders and so on.

