Dear Readers,

My paper has changed substantially since my draft. While I did not completely rewrite it, I eliminated half of my sources due to the discrepancy between mental disability and mental illness. In my draft, though I intended to discuss disability as defined as not being able to live independently and having some sort of debilitating disorder, this was not ideal both because this covers a large group of people and also simplifies the differences between disability and illness that does not do each subset of individuals justice. Thankfully, these concerns were addressed to me during my conference, and although at first I was quite resistant to separating the two groups, I think that the time I spent researching mental *disability* and clarifying my knowledge of this group has solidified my understanding of them and allowed me to come up with a thesis that strays from the typical “we need to treat people that we treat badly better” statement.

That being said, coming up with a new thesis was my hardest challenge in this paper. I had difficulty coming up with an arguable claim because a solution to the problem of the marginalization of the mentally disabled seems so daunting and maybe even impossible. With help from the Writing Center, I was able to extend my own ideas into a workable and arguable thesis, which centers on the idea that the marginalization of the mentally disabled continues today despite advances made in disability rights due to the disconnect between the linguistic debate of scholars and how this is communicated to the general public.

The way in which I discuss this is structurally organized in the following manner. First, I use the short story “Flowers for Algernon” as a way to introduce the topic of mental retardation and its treatment in the past. I delve briefly into the history of their treatment in America and medical practices that were used to institutionalize and sterilize them. I then discuss the so-called paradigm shift and how this seems to have changed attitudes towards the mentally disabled, but that the historical stigma associated with this group of people inhibiting true success in this realm. Next, I discuss possible solutions to the issue by diving my sources up into different “camps.” The first suggests that changing “mental retardation” to “intellectual disability,” due to the negative connotations association with the word “retard,” can solve the problem. The second suggests that eliminating labels and categorizations altogether is the answer. I refute both of these using additional sources, and then extend the ideas of Walter Benn Michaels in “The Trouble with Diversity.” Ultimately, my argument comes down to the fact that either changing or eliminating labels will not enact positive social change, because this focus on semantic change actually detracts our attention from the real issue. This issue, as I said, is the disconnect between the scholars who come up with these terms (and think of them as medically neutral) and the general public, who remains shielded from their discussions and thus do not know what terms such as “retard” are actually supposed to mean.

One problem I had with this paper was setting up my motive. I tried to build up to a motive asking the question of whether labels themselves are the reason for the stigmatization of the mentally disabled. I’m not sure how effective this was, because it may seem that my motive centers on whether progress has been made in our treatment of the mentally disabled, which was my motive for my first draft. I think that the two of these overlap a bit, in that the discussion over whether progress has actually been made requires a look at how we have tried to progress. In this case, I discuss how we have tried to progress through appreciating differences and thus reinforcing different categorizations as a positive rather than negative. By doing this, my motive hopefully presents itself as a reexamination of the whole concept of labeling and what effect that has on the marginalization of the mentally disabled.

Also, I spent time working on orienting my readers before using sources, so I am wondering how effective that is or if it comes across as too overwhelming with all of the names and titles. While I wanted to provide background on who and what the source was talking about, I thought that throwing too many names and article titles seemed distracting from my own arguments when I read over my paper. I think that I did a better job of analyzing my evidence in this revision than in my previous draft, where I basically summarized different sources without adding in my own voice. Even when providing sources as informational material rather than offering the as points to contribute to my argument, I tried to use my own voice by paraphrasing rather than having big sections of block quotes everywhere. This also plays into my research experience in general. While initially, I found it hard to get away from mental illness sources to differentiate disability, I ended up finding many helpful articles that offered multiple perspectives on the debate regarding semantic change. I am particularly happy that I was able to divide my sources into “camps” to pose them against each other and try to find an argument from the resulting conversation. Thank you for reading my work and I hope you enjoy it!

Sincerely,

Phoebe

The Trouble with Semantics: A Look at the Stigmatization of the “Intellectually Disabled”

In Daniel Keyes’ short story entitled “Flowers for Algernon,” Charlie Gordon undergoes a surgical experiment that artificially enhances his intelligence, transforming him from “mentally retarded,” or rather what modern progressives now consider “intellectually disabled,” with an IQ of 68 to become intellectually superior to even the doctors who performed the operation on him. The fictitious work was published in 1959, before significant strides were made in advocating for the rights of those marginalized due to disability. Accordingly, a modern reading of Charlie’s experiences as having been born with mental disabilities but given the chance to attain an above-average level of intelligence compels a reexamination of societal attitudes towards the mentally disabled population and, more importantly, what this conveys about measures that have be taken to allegedly progress in a positive direction for the future.

Charlie Gordon, as a character of Keyes’ design, represents only one case of the stigmatization that has faced people with mental disabilities despite the ideal of acceptance into the celebrated melting pot of America. In theory, America was founded on the democratic virtues of equal opportunity and justice for all citizens. John S. Oehler, a professor who supported the development of an internationally recognized institute for developmentally disabled individuals, exemplifies this dichotomy in his foreword of the book *Significant Disabilities* by observing, “The concept of inclusion is a singularly American ideal. To exclude or separate persons on the basis of an attribute is antithetical to the American way of life. But, as a society, that is exactly what we have done from a historical perspective. At various times in our history we have excluded groups of persons because of an attribute that differed from the majority” (xi). While this has perhaps been historically true, our awareness of past injustices has now prompted a progressive shift towards the appreciation of diverse peoples, regardless of who they are, where they come from, and who they want to become.

These changes can be seen in terms of modern American policies and efforts to emphasize the unique differences of all individuals as a point of appreciation rather than deprecation, namely through an almost obsessive categorization of people into deceptively homogenous groups denoting not only race, ethnicity, or gender but also mental ability and function. Arguably, this pervasive tendency to classify and group, whether as “black” and “white” or “able” and “disabled,” reveals that as of yet, progress still remains to be made before American society can be described as fully tolerant and accepting. In what ways does this instinctive labeling of individuals contribute to the marginalization of the mentally disabled, or is categorizing simply a necessary process of identification?

One reactionary stance that has gained prominence in recent times is to change current attitudes about the mentally disabled. Scholars such as Steven A. Gelb and Scot Danforth propose a necessary shift in semantics, from “mental retardation” to “intellectually disabled,” as a way of reaffirming their self-worth and reflecting the greater purpose of social activism through positively charged language. Another point of view, even more daring than the previous, held by David A. Hollinger focuses on the ideal of eliminating categorizations entirely, as they serve to limit rather than enable those defined by a label. However, the interaction of “Flowers for Algernon” with these works ultimately forces a reevaluation of this debate, suggesting that the concept of appreciating difference either through linguistic reform or removal actually circumvents the issue at hand, which stems not from the labels themselves but rather from the disconnect in language between the scholarly and public realms.

To understand pervasive attitudes held regarding the mentally disabled today, it is important to first understand the historical context of their treatment and public role in the past, as awareness and knowledge of these former behaviors have, in many ways, contributed to the current stigmatization of these individuals. In most cases, the mentally disabled were removed from society, locked away, and only seen by family members. In his article discussing the sterilization and control of the mentally disabled in the United States between 1892 and 1947, James W. Trent examines how superintendents advocated for “sterilization to maintain institutional order, sterilization for eugenical control, and sterilization for controlling the growth of institutional populations” (56). The public conception of the “feeble minded” remained one characterized by fear and mistrust, as most believed them to be a highly dangerous group of people. Especially during the eugenics movement in the early 20th century, they were often involuntarily sterilized to eliminate these inferior beings through selective breeding (61). Overall, the mentally disabled were in need of strict management, control, and segregation. The official classification of individuals as “idiots,” “imbeciles,” and “morons,” however, did not take hold until after the introduction of Alfred Binet’s Intelligence Quotient test in 1905 (Sternberg & Jarvin, 95-96). These terms were used to designate individuals of different aptitudes, which are today divided into different levels of severity of mental retardation. Although Binet intended this scale to be used as an indicator of abnormality to facilitate the selection of children with reduced mental abilities for special education programs, the American reinterpretation of his work ultimately used these categorizations to promote segregation (96).

However, American attitudes towards mental disability have undergone a significant transformation since the 1970’s, following many other civil rights movements. In *Disabled Rights: American Disability Policy and the Fight for Equality,* sociologist researcher Jacqueline Vaughn Switzer notes that attitudes towards this historically marginalized group seem to have undergone a “paradigm shift,” from viewing disability as a medical problem inhibiting an “individual’s functional capability” to considering “disabled persons from the perspective of architectural, institutional, and attitudinal barriers to full participation and integration” (13-14). Disability rights activists have increasingly advocated for the rights of both the physically and mentally handicapped with the goal of ending a history of prejudiced treatment and discrimination. According to Switzer, this shift has promoted a new attitude of regarding disability rights in the same light as other civil rights movements and encouraged the public to move away from forced institutionalization and sterilization. One example of the effect of this paradigm shift rests in the semantic change from disparaging terms such as “moron” and “idiot” to “mental retardation”, which was considered medically neutral at the time (O’Neill 281-2).

In this context, as we revert back to our discussion of “Flowers for Algernon”*,* Keyes effectively uses the enhancement of Charlie’s severely underdeveloped intelligence toexemplify the mistreatment of the mentally disabled before such activism occurred. Before fully attaining a heightened level of intelligence as a result of the experimental surgery performed in order to potentially double or triple Charlie’s IQ, he is shown to be exceedingly naïve in his interactions with his coworkers at the factory. Keyes uses the character of Charlie Gordon to depict the harsh reality of bullying and mockery facing mentally handicapped individuals without their own realization. Detailing in his progress report a conversation with Miss Kinnian, he genuinely believes his co-workers to be caring and intelligent friends:

She says Im a fine person and Ill show them all. I asked her why. She said never mind but I shouldnt feel bad if I find out everybody isnt nice like I think. She said for a person who god gave so little to you done more then a lot of people with brains they never even used. I said all my friends are smart people but there good. They like me and they never did anything that wasnt nice. Then she got something in her eye and she had to run out to the ladys room. (Keyes 97)

As a reader, it is clear that Charlie’s co-workers have been using him for entertainment purposes and are far from being his true friends. They delight in mocking him as an inferior being, especially because he does not realize it in his original state. It is only when Charlie’s intelligence artificially increases that he understands the mockery they have been making of him and the fact that he had never truly been a part of their society.

Although “Flowers for Algernon” was published in 1959, people like Charlie continue to be marginalized as a group even today. The aforementioned paradigm shift and efforts to replace negatively charged terms with more neutral terms have in reality done little to reduce the stigma and negative attitudes surrounding mental disability. As evidenced by growing movements such as “Spread the Word to End the Word” (Joseph P. Kennedy Jr. Foundation), many would attest to the fact that the mistreatment of the mentally disabled is embodied by the common usage of “retard” as a derogatory insult and the description of a deviant behavior or entity as “retarded.” People often use these words without even thinking about the nature of the disability they are in fact evoking. This is coupled by the fact presented by the “Mental Health and Human Rights Resource Guide” that individuals with mental disabilities today continue to face discrimination in the form of unjustified institutionalization, social exclusion, education, and employment (“Mental Health” 32-33). Evidently, the character of Charlie Gordon would most likely face the same abuses as a mentally retarded individual in the real world even today, more than 40 years after the disability rights movement and the so-called paradigm shift.

Why, then, have popular attitudes towards the mentally disabled apparently remained stagnant and comparable to those held before “Flowers for Algernon” was published? These largely disparaging views concerning people with mental impairments arise from the structural formation of public and self-internalized stigma, a societal attitude held by the general public due to longstanding historical perceptions. The sociological work of researchers Patrick Corrigan and Chow Lam in a published journal regarding rehabilitation education explores the stigma of mental illness influencing the way people think about disabilities, suggesting that the stigmatization of the mentally disabled derives from historical practices and treatment. Due to the former institutionalization of people with mental disabilities, “societal awareness of these institutions yields unintended discrimination” (55). Since it has only been in recent times that disabled individuals have integrated into full society, inadvertent prejudices result as people are unsure of how to regard these new members and mistakenly rationalize that the mentally disabled had been previously institutionalized for good reason. Thus, “perceptions about the need for constraints lead to stereotypes about incompetence (the person with disability is not able to perform everyday functions) and character weakness (loss of functioning is due to lack of moral fiber)” (55). In this way, stigmatization has the tendency to dehumanize individuals, grouping them together into the less valuable category of “other” based on assumptions drawn from historical treatment of the mentally disabled.

Indeed, reflecting on the true success of the “paradigm shift” and the civil rights model upon which disability policies have been based, Switzer additionally notes that “millions of dollars are being spent on social welfare, vocational rehabilitation, and employment programs that virtually all observers agree have done little to better the lives of the disabled” due to cultural and societal norms almost subconsciously indoctrinating the idea that disabled people lack the same level of humanity and are therefore not as deserving of the same respect, support, or opportunities fundamentally available to others as a right (4). Though focusing on disability in general, her observations can be fittingly extrapolated in considering the plight of mentally disabled Americans more specifically. Considering the level of discrimination, abuse, and stigmatization against mentally disabled people continuing today in the form of language, it becomes increasingly evident that mental disabilities receive a comparable amount of stigmatization as physical disability.

Although the operation performed on Charlie initially elevates his IQ to a superhuman level, this transformation is fleeting. Slowly but surely, his intelligence diminishes until he descends to his former level of mental retardation (Keyes). Keyes perhaps uses this experimental surgery, intended to effectively “fix” Charlie by increasing his cognitive abilities, to relate the idea that rather than trying in vain to fix people with mental disabilities, it is important instead to appreciate and validate their worth as equal human beings. This interpretation of “Flowers for Algernon” thus informs our understanding of the debate centered on the need for a semantic change with regards to the labels we have placed on the “mentally retarded.”

One opinion focuses on the need to appreciate the worth of each individual by freeing them from association with negatively charged terms, which bear the weight of historical stigma through popularization as expressions of abuse, in favor of “intellectually disabled” or even “developmentally delayed.” As part of a collection of arguments centered on the need for semantic change regarding mental retardation, two scholars in particular criticize the current terminology used to label these individuals and maintain that the problem lies in how we think about and address them. In “The Dignity of Humanity is Not a Scientific Construct,” Steven A. Gelb primarily discusses the negative connotations present in the formerly neutral term “retarded,” stating that the name should be changed because “the term *mental retardation*, like its predecessors, long ago escaped from the clinical realm of classification into universal English usage as a potent, utterly dismissive invective in the mouths of adults and school children” (55). He criticizes the irony of the fact that the “American Association on Mental Retardation,” though indeed altered from its original title of the “Association of Medical Officers of American Institutions of Idiotic and Feeble-Minded Persons,” is an organization that wishes to advocate for the rights of individuals while they remain constrained to such a demeaning and dehumanizing term (55-56). Scot Danforth extends this notion in his article entitled, “New Words for New Purposes: A Challenge for the AAMR.” Though he holds a view similar to that of Gelb, he further suggests that the term “mental retardation” be changed to reflect the greater social purpose of acceptance and equality. Rather than organizations naming themselves by way of identifying those they wish to serve, they should instead change these labels to pronounce explicit social goals. The Canadian Association for Retarded Citizens, for example, should be modeled after in changing its name to the Canadian Association for Community Living (54). By “using terms that envision and announce a social purpose for the organization” (54), we may then be able to transform the stigma attached to the mentally disabled into the collective acceptance and support of all persons.

While certainly of commendable intent, this semantic-focused solution falls short due to the principle of the “euphemism treadmill,” as coined by Steven Pinker in his discussion on linguistic reform. A researcher specializing in visual cognition and psycholinguistics, he explains that “people invent new words for emotionally charged referents, but soon the euphemism becomes tainted by association, and a new word must be found, which soon acquires its own connotations, and so on” (n.p.). To be sure, following the historical trend of labels such as “idiocy, imbecility, constitutional inferiority, subnormality, feeble mindedness, moronity, mental defectiveness, and mental deficiency” (Gelb 55) all formerly used to describe what is now termed mental retardation, it seems as though Pinker’s concept of the euphemism treadmill holds true. In an attempt to find new terms removed of negative connotations and stigmatized assumptions, more and more labels are constantly thrown out and replaced, only to have the cycle repeat in a matter of years.

We must consider, then, if the term “mentally retarded” is the real issue at hand. Ben O’Neill furthers Pinker’s idea in his work, “A Critique of Politically Correct Language”:

The word’s [mentally retarded] lexicology does not indicate a hostile meaning. To ‘retard’ something means to hinder or impede it, to make it slower or diminish its development or progress in some way. Thus, to describe someone as ‘mentally retarded’ literally means that their mental processes are somehow impeded, hindered, diminished, or slowed down. This meaning is certainly accurate, and it is a neutral description because the term itself does not imply a value judgment about such diminished mental functioning. (281)

Thus, the term derives its negative connotation not in the term itself, but rather the delivery, tone, and context of it in spoken language. As medically neutral terms get popularized for use as a derogatory insult, people assume that the word itself is an implicit and devaluing judgment of the mentally disabled. He additionally claims that the focus of semantic change encourages people to take offense at neutral terms when none is intended, as “by focusing solely on words and disregarding tone and context, they *manufacture* offense, even in situations where both the implications of remarks and the speaker’s manifest intentions are benign” (284). Moreover, this language change encourages “an ever-increasing vocabulary of insults and purportedly offensive terms, along with a retreating and ever-changing list of socially acceptable terms” (285). By fixating on the semantics of derogatory terms, advocates of more euphemistic language thereby detract from their goal of creating more positive terms by actually deeming a growing collection of words as unacceptable and offensive.

Considering the effect of the euphemism treadmill, is the very existence of our numerous labels and categorizations in fact the true problem impeding the attainment of equality for the mentally disabled? Perhaps the solution instead must be to get rid of classifications themselves. In a chapter of his book *Postethnic America,* David A. Hollinger discusses the universality of ancestrally derived distinctions that have historically separated groups of American people (20). He comments on the American goal of equality as manifested through a reinforcement rather than erasure of cultural differences that separate groups of people, describing how “this feeling—that the goal of equality demands for America a future even more ethnic than its past—has encouraged the nation to accept a distinctive system of classification by descent-defined communities” (23). Though directed at discussions regarding race and ethnicity, Hollinger’s arguments extend into the discussion on mental disability as well.

In the same way that the American public puts labels to celebrate racial diversity, we put labels on mental diversity to signify a point of difference. While different does not necessarily equate to worse, Hollinger notes that “at issue is not really difference in general but the highlighting of certain differences at the expense of others” (26). The distinctions that divide groups of people, whether due to race or mental capacity, may not inherently imply good or bad, but certainly, the existence of categories leads to the loss of individuality within the grouping. In terms of stigmatization, this tendency to group and separate based on terminology is highly problematic in that these labels thus further the stereotypic views of the mentally disabled as all the same. The individual self-worth of each person is no longer recognized when anyone with a mental disability is grouped together into a homogenous category. Just as Hollinger advocates for a postethnic America moving away from stringently defined racial distinctions, perhaps the answer here lies in the erasure of labels distinguishing the “mentally retarded.” Therefore, extending Hollinger’s views to the issue of mental retardation, we might conclude that labels in and of themselves are the true source of stigma.

Yet, inasmuch as Hollinger himself acknowledges this proposed dismissal of categorizations as a mere ideal by stating that “the notion of a postethnic America is deeply alien to many features of American and world history” (21), perhaps the elimination of labels is not realistically feasible due to the arguable necessity of distinguishing terms. Indeed, sociologist professor David Goode examines the possibility of doing away with such terminology to brand the mentally disabled. He reminds us that “because some sort of distinguishing label is required for science, clinical work, and human services, there is not feasible way to do away with labels altogether” (58). The very point of labeling the mentally disabled is not to belittle and dehumanize them, but rather as a way to ensure that the public is taking active steps to support and help them lead better lives in the future. Goode concludes, “in the practical world we need labels, for labels allow scientists to conduct research about disabilities, clinicians to accurately diagnose and treat patients with disabilities, and special educators and social security personnel to identify disabled individuals entitled to special services, supports, and benefits (59). Thus, we can see that the elimination of the term mentally retarded all together does not the issue at hand.

The shortcomings of these two sides of the debate shed light on the relative futility and even insignificance of the semantic debate dominating disability studies. While these scholars believe that either the alteration or elimination of labels and terms have the power to shape social consciousness, the very nature of the debate suggests that ultimately, positive social change may only be attainable by redirecting our focus onto the troubling disconnect between the convoluted, theoretical definitions of the scholarly realm and the ways in which the public applies these terms.

A third perspective in this debate will allow us to critically examine the practicality of this proposition. Diverging from both of the aforementioned faulty perspectives, American literary theorist Walter Benn Michaels argues that acceptance and appreciation merely ignores the fundamental problem of mental disability entirely. Though in his book, entitled *The Trouble with Diversity*, he focuses not on mental illness but on poverty, Michaels asserts that “the general principle here is that our commitment to diversity has redefined the opposition to discrimination as the appreciation (rather than the elimination) of difference. So with respect to race, the idea is not just that racism is a bad thing (which of course it is) but that race itself is a good thing” (5). He continues, however, that “white is not better than black, but rich is definitely better than poor” (10) and observes this flawed idea as circumventing the issue at hand by removing the need for any change other than the elimination of personal prejudice. According to Michaels, since we are urged to be respectful of the poor, who have too little appreciation rather than too little money, this results in the misconception that our attitude towards them, rather than their poverty, is the problem to be solved (19).

Arguably, this proposition can be extended to the idea that being “able” is better than being “disabled.” By appreciating the “differently abled” or “special” population of the mentally disabled through semantic change and a focus on linguistic reform that highlights their equality as humans translating to an equality of ability, we actually detract attention from the real issue facing these individuals. Rather than focusing on legislating name changes or removals, the mentally disabled would be better served if we direct these efforts towards extending the exclusive debate of scholars regarding these terms to the public. As of now, misuse of the words “retard” and “retarded” stems from general ignorance as to what the term denotes and its intended use as a medical label. People assume that mental retardation is inherently negative due to its frequent misuse as an insult or expression of aversion. Due to the disconnect between the debate on linguistics that occurs among sociologists, professors, and researchers, the public remains shielded from the discussion regarding what terms should be used to categorize the mentally disabled, and, as a result of this lack of knowledge, the popularization of terms with unknown meanings originating from the clinical realm lend themselves to misuse stemming from historical stigmatization despite modern attempts to reverse this past discrimination.

At best, euphemistic language merely results in the transferal of negative attitudes and perceptions to new terms, while also hiding the true nature of mental disability by promoting these individuals as merely different but equally capable. This solution realistically harms them more than helping them by diminishing awareness of their needs. In addition, we have seen that labels are perhaps a fundamental aspect of humanity and, according to some, a necessity allowing for support and services to be given to the mentally disabled. Ultimately, what matters most is not the terms we assign to this population, but rather the way in which the scholarly realm, which creates these neutral terms for identification purposes, communicates these intents to the public. Though at present, people in the world like Charlie Gordon continue to be misunderstood due to the ignorant use of “retard” as a derogatory insult, the redirection our attention to promoting better communication between the academic and public sectors has the possibility to change the future. Only then might equality for the mentally disabled be fully attainable.

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