

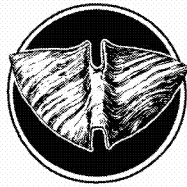
**SOCIAL PERCEPTIONS OF
PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES
IN HISTORY**

SOCIAL PERCEPTIONS OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES IN HISTORY

By

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To Marty, Chris, and Kelly

PREFACE

This book was written to provide an overview of major historical contexts and to describe how historical occurrences shaped the nature of disabilities. It introduces the reader to the topic of the social history of people with disabilities and provides basic background information on disability in prior centuries. It presents major notions for understanding general social trends regarding people with disabilities. The book provides an overview of some of the major trends that directly influenced people with disabilities. It was written to increase our knowledge and consciousness of presentations of people with disabilities and to fuel further inquiries on the topic. Many of our contemporary images and ideas about people with disabilities cannot be applied to people with disabilities who lived in earlier times. Other images and ideas can be traced back to earlier ideas about the nature of disabilities and the people who have them. It has been my hope to present the rich texture of presentation regarding disability from earlier times in such a way that images of people with disabilities are more meaningful to people with disabilities, scholars, and other readers of this book.

It provides a general survey of how people with disabilities were perceived in western history. It draws on art, literature, and historical information from earlier times. The span of time selected for study focuses on the Middle Ages through the nineteenth century. The period of the Middle Ages was selected because it represents a watershed of ideas regarding people with disabilities and significant changes in artistic representations of all people, including people with disabilities. In prior centuries individuals were relatively insignificant and artistic images were relatively sterile. The church exercised so much control over art and literature, that individuality found little representation. The Middle Ages represents a period of change in both artistic techniques and attitudes toward people with disabilities. It was at the close

of the Middle Ages that artists and authors began to portray the individual characteristics of people with disabilities. During the Middle Ages artists began to present detailed and individualistic characteristics of their human subjects. The late Middle Ages gave rise to the use of perspective, as human subjects began to be presented in natural contexts. The thirteenth through the fifteenth centuries saw increased effort to depict subjects as individuals and as they actually appeared (Hofstatter, 1968). People with disabilities were included in this shift but stereotypes and traditions continued to influence the manner in which artists and authors represented them. The Middle Ages also represent an interesting time regarding the social interpretations and relationships between people with disabilities and those without, although many people acquired disabilities during the life span.

When the Middle Ages came to a close and the Renaissance flowered, a new orientation on life developed. Life in this world took on a new importance. The focus on the individual that emerged with the Renaissance brought attention to people and their characteristics. Some of the humanist focus brought about by the Renaissance also affected notions and images of people with disabilities. As societies turned toward understanding humankind, a natural curiosity grew about people with disabilities. People with disabilities increasingly became the subject of art and literature. Art during the Renaissance and particularly that of the later northern Renaissance sheds much light on how people with disabilities were perceived and treated by their respective societies. The centuries that followed the Middle Ages and Renaissance were characterized by accelerated social change and social upheaval, which in turn caused dramatic changes in many perceptions about people with disabilities.

The study ends with the nineteenth century for several reasons. First, the nineteenth century represents century of great importance to people with disabilities. This was the century of Darwinism and major scientific breakthroughs that changed some of the paradigms used to interpret the nature of disabilities. This was the century that led to many reforms in the care and treatment of people with disabilities. It was the century that fostered some of the stereotypes about people with disabilities that have only recently been challenged in contemporary society. The study's scope does not continue through the twentieth century because there already exists a considerable body of information about people with disabilities during the twentieth century.

The twentieth century is one in which considerable legislative, medical, and legal materials are available. While the twentieth century is undoubtedly an important one, it needs to be addressed as a separate topic.

Some historians and scholars may take issue with the broad scope of this work, suggesting that significant details and subtleties will be lost in a book covering the Middle Ages and ending in the nineteenth century. They may also argue that each region, with its unique traditions and culture, or each of the periods or centuries encompassed in this book deserves intensive, thorough coverage in a separate volume. All of these points have merit but this work is not intended to be a detailed or period specific piece but an introduction to some of the basic presentations of people with disabilities over the centuries. Only by studying presentations and images of people with disabilities over such a lengthy period is it possible to determine whether these views and presentations were short-term or lasting. No other work presents such a broad social overview on which more detailed studies can be based. While there are many excellent texts on specific disabilities, works that cover a broad range are absent. This study is meant to be a survey of the social landscape and a catalyst for further research.

Although this book might, in the eyes of some, represent a sizable effort at covering the topic of disability, it in no way fully covers the topic. Nor does the book represent all of the experiences that people with disabilities have had over the centuries. Rather it, to borrow a cliché, only scratches the surface. Anyone who decides to study the topic should be prepared for great voids in information. Hopefully this study helps fill some of the previous voids.

HERBERT C. COVEY

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**SOCIAL PERCEPTIONS OF
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Chapter 1

THE CHANGING SOCIAL CONTEXTS OF DISABILITY

What does it mean to be a person with a disability? People with disabilities are individuals who have physical or mental impairments that make it more difficult for them to achieve certain goals. Disability refers to the consequences of an impairment, that is, any restriction or lack of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered appropriate for nondisabled persons. A disability is a functional limitation that interferes with a person's ability to walk, think, hear, learn, or see. It is a characteristic of an individual in the same sense as hair color or height but it also indicates that the individual has more difficulty in achieving certain goals or objectives. This difficulty may stem from the disability itself or sociocultural factors in which the disability is reacted to and interpreted.

Culture plays an important role in defining, interpreting, and evaluating disabilities. It is commonly understood that the meanings attached to disability differ among cultures and within cultures, and over time. A disability has a social character because culture and society define, and in some cases, impair or impede people with disabilities from accomplishing their goals and objectives. Some individuals perceived as having a disability might be able to achieve their goals if society or culture did not hamper their efforts. Disabilities are closely linked to situations and barriers imposed by society, culture, the environment, and oneself. A handicap is the social disadvantage that results from an impairment or disability. A handicap is not determined by an individual's physical limitations, but instead reflects the social consequences of that disability.

This book is about disabilities and cultural-historical discourse about them. From the very beginning it is important to realize that differences in discourse on disability, even within the same culture and social context, are likely to occur. Disabilities such as blindness and developmental disabilities were perceived and discussed differently and in similar ways during the same

periods. Jessica Scheer and Nora Groce (1988: 23) once commented, "Throughout human history, societies have defined what did and did not constitute a disability or handicap, and these definitions have changed over time." For example, some people who are deaf believe very strongly that they are not disabled but simply different. Their disability is more an indication of society's intolerance and suppression of their method of communicating (sign language) than a functional limitation. Being culturally defined, a disability is not simply a fact, such as being blind or deaf, but a complex set of meanings, reactions, and interpretations reflected in what has been written and artistically depicted.

People with disabilities have been members of every society (Scheer & Groce, 1988). However, the constant presence of people with disabilities, especially those with physical disabilities, is often overlooked (Scheer & Groce, 1988). Experts estimate that between 2 to 10 percent of all of humanity is disabled to some degree. In the United States alone the National Institute of Medicine estimated that in 1991 one in seven people or many as 35 million people had disabilities (Sharpiro, 1993). Global estimates are about 245 million, or one per every 6 to 7 people have at least one disability. Only about 15 percent of people with disabilities had them at birth, thus most people acquired disabilities over the span of their lifetimes. What separates human beings from other species is the ability to attach meaning to those people with disabilities. Societies do not ignore people with disabilities but rather develop sets of responses based on abstract notions about what it means to have a disability or be disabled. With this attachment of meaning come a variety of responses ranging from full acceptance and integration to total rejection, separation, and persecution.

Societies have run the entire gamut of human responses toward people with disabilities ranging from outright genocide to adoration. Societies have treated people with disabilities as evil beings. For example, during World War I, the allies believed the withered arm of the Kaiser was responsible for his quest for power. Centuries earlier, the British attributed the alleged evil character of Richard III to his disability of having a crooked back. In contrast are situations when disabilities have been associated with positive characteristics. For example, Americans attributed Franklin Roosevelt's greatness to his overcoming his disabling disease. At times societies have neglected them and other times they have been used as scapegoats. They have experienced indifference and invisibility but also have been paraded in front of others as sideshow curiosities. Even with recent loosening of social attitudes toward disability, societies have not afforded people total access to jobs, opportunities, and other benefits and experiences that society has to offer. This has resulted in a perceived need for laws protecting their rights and the demands for access and control over their lives.

To understand how they lived in the past, it is important to know how familiar they were to their respective societies. Societal familiarity with people with disabilities has shifted over time. Sometimes they have been isolated and other times they moved about in relative freedom. They were essentially familiar to the general publics to which they belonged. Familiarity by definition infers to know, recognize, and understand. It can foster acceptance and tolerance. When people become unfamiliar to society, the result can be misunderstanding, rejection, and intolerance. Societies have had differing degrees of familiarity with people with disabilities. Today people have lost their familiarity with people with disabilities (Scheer & Groce, 1988). Nondisabled peoples' familiarity with people with disabilities may be improving but on the whole they still represent a relative unknown. People do not always know how they should treat and react to people with disabilities. They also do not know how they should expect to be treated by people with disabilities.

Initially, people with disabilities lived in relative social autonomy unless they were viewed as threatening. Over the course of time, some disabilities were judged to require social responses, such as restriction or isolation. The restriction and isolation of people with disabilities, especially during the intolerant Victorian period, resulted in them becoming less familiar to the general public. As societies isolated and institutionalized people, people with disabilities became less familiar. With this shift, misunderstanding, fear, and other negative reactions to people with disabilities arose. As we locked up, isolated, and segregated people, the perception of their lives became one of speculation and mystery rather than based on fact and experience. As the curve of social isolation increased, so did misunderstanding.

Relative to history, we know very little about how people with disabilities lived and were perceived in their respective societies. When historians have written history, they have not focused on people with disabilities. Consequently, the story of their roles and positions in their respective societies has yet to be told. Yet, we know they have been active participants in the building of western civilization. Societies have not relegated them to isolation in asylums, hospitals, institutions, and back streets. Contemporary scholars have only started to explore how these relationships and others have played out in social history. The ground for historical inquiry is rich and relatively unexplored. For example, McBride (1985: 41-42) commented, "Sprinkled across the pages of medieval writings are such maladies as mental disorders, physical deformities, blindness and eye diseases, deafness and ear diseases, impediments of speech, baldness, foul odors." The same can be said for works of art over the centuries.

ENDURING SOCIAL PERCEPTIONS OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

When reviewing historical information on social interactions involving people with disabilities, certain enduring perceptions, attitudes, preconceptions, and stereotypes emerge. Some of these social perceptions are specific to certain disabilities during specific times. For example, blindness and mental illness have gone through periods when they were romanticized. In contrast, physical disabilities have never been romanticized.

As Subhuman

A major social perception of people with disabilities was that they were subhuman. Being subhuman could mean many things. For instance, a social perception people have held about people with disabilities was that they were, or became wild animals. Throughout the centuries, people believed that people with disabilities were less than human. People have believed that people with disabilities were closer to wild animals than humans. They have assumed that as disabilities became more severe, the people having them became more animal-like in constitution and behavior. This perception has surfaced in many of the characterizations of people with mental illness. They were presented as being wildmen, savages, wildwomen, or animals from antiquity through much of the nineteenth century.

This perception is clearly illustrated in the biblical tale of King Nebuchadnezzar who, according to legend, became like a wild animal with claws, hair, and animal behavior. Nebuchadnezzar was the archetype of the animal-like nature of people who were mentally ill (Pouchelle, 1990). For people with mental illness, this perception continued well into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In a similar vein, folktales describing people becoming transformed into werewolves, common during the Middle Ages and later centuries, reflect this perception. There were traditions and legends that claim that wild animals have supposedly raised and nurtured abandoned or lost children. For example, people have credited wild animals for raising “feral” children. The mythological ancestry of feral children traces back to at least antiquity (Fiedler, 1978). Greco-Roman legend tells of Thyro, who was raised among cattle, the god Zeus who was suckled by a goat, and Romulus and Remus who were nurtured by a wolf.

For people who were deaf, there was a very old perception that there is a link between speech and human nature, including reason. Saint-Loup (1993:386) observed, that many medieval citizens thought that speech was what separated, “humans from animals.” Saint-Loup linked this view to the