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Paper 1

### A historical examination of mental disabilities/disorders

There are many different disabilities, but they can mostly be sorted into two categories, physical and mental. Physical disabilities are things like blindness or a missing limb, while examples of mental disabilities might be dyslexia and autism. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines disabilities as “an impairment in a persons body structure or function, or mental functioning” that restricts or impacts daily activities (CDC, Disability and Health Overview), and mental disorders are “significant disturbances in thinking, emotional regulation, or behavior” (WHO). This paper will focus on mental disabilities, and changes in understanding and opinions of the disabilities, and the treatment and view of disabled people, over time in the United States.

Mental disabilities were officially recognized as such in the United States in 1995, under the Persons with Disabilities Act (Chaudhury Pranit). The first law acknowledging mental disabilities, however, was the National Mental Health Act, passed in 1946 (National Institutes of Health)

These facts are important because of how the past influences the present. To understand something, you must first understand its roots and where it comes from. The topic of disability

rights and public perception is still relevant today, and it is important to know not just how far we have come but also how far we have yet to go. It is easy to ignore disabled people and their struggles in favor of the problems of the abled, or pretend they are a minority of the population, but you would be hard-pressed to find someone who does not know a disabled person in their life. According to the CDC (Disability Impacts All of Us Infographic) approximately 28.7% of the people in the US have some form of moderate to severe disability, mental or physical. Disabled people aren't going away, but outdated attitudes can, and understanding where they came from is critical to disproving them.

Once, in 1867, it used to be a crime to be a person with a mental disability in public “On the conviction of any person for practicing mendicancy or begging, if it shall appear that such person is without means of support, and infirm and physically unable to earn a support or livelihood, or is, for any cause, a proper person to be maintained at the Almshouse, the fine and imprisonment provided for in the preceding section may be omitted, and such person may be committed to the Almshouse” (Schweik, Susan, *The Ugly Laws*; disability in public pg. 26). Almshouses were essentially unregulated, overcrowded public facilities used for housing “Individuals with disabilities, criminals, and paupers” (Meldon, Perri, *Disability History*), with the majority of residents being there involuntarily, and few ways out. It was automatically assumed that a person with a mental disability was incapable of supporting themselves, and they were locked up. In the 1840s, Dr. Thomas Kirkbride opened a new, more humane hospital inspired by the “moral treatment” approach that had started in Europe, moving away from physical restraints and instead giving patients tasks to keep them busy and calm, such as gardening, while having separate wings for patients, nurses, and staff. Other preexisting hospitals soon followed this example, and religious organizations supported the new model. Unfortunately,

due to a variety of reasons, such as budget restrictions, the discovery of new medical “treatments” like electroshock therapy, and the increasingly prevalent concept of eugenics and that humanity could be improved by preventing people with undesirable traits such as disabilities from reproducing, these programs were shut down and the new ideas became standard use. From the late 1800s to early 1900s, physicians would perform forced sterilizations and lobotomies on patients, to prevent them from having children and “reduce “mania” or “highly disturbing” behavior” ending around the 1950s as doctors started questioning the effectiveness of the lobotomies, though not before thousands of people were mutilated. It was in the 1960s that these hospitals and the private and psychiatric institutions such as asylums were shut down and instead replaced with new ones that attempted to treat disabled people on a case-by-case basis, rather than assigning a single treatment for all disabilities, which laid the foundation for the modern method (Perri, Meldon, Disability History).

Now, public schools and colleges have disability support offices, there are designated parking spaces for people in wheelchairs, ramp options instead of just stairs, all curbs have sloped sections, and the Americans with Disabilities Act was passed in 1990 granting people with disabilities many new legal protections and rights, such as requiring employers to provide accommodations and banning them from refusing job applications or services to disabled people on basis of their disability ([ada.gov](http://ada.gov)). As stated by Michael L. Wehmeyer, chair of special education and Distinguished Professor at University of Kansas Ross, mental disabilities have “Historically, ... only been framed with a negative, with what people can not do”, but this is changing, and he is hopeful that “we are moving into an era where [their] limitations can be accommodated”. We have gone from locking away to accommodating and supporting.

No longer are people with mental disorders confined to asylums and isolated. No longer are laws decided without input from those they affect. No more are there attempts to “cure” (Meldon, Perri) disabled people using the same methods, but instead tailored, case-by-case approaches that attempt to work with the people being treated (Meldon, Perri).

However, things aren’t perfect. Prejudices do not disappear that easily, and problematic attitudes remain around, which is not helped by the lack of prominent disability recognition by disabled people themselves. Autism Speaks is an organization that claims to speak and stand for people with autism yet has no autistic people in its leadership team and is more focused on attempting to “fix” autistic people than help them integrate their autism into their lives and live with it.

The rise of the internet and globalization has led not only to better sharing of information, collaboration, and opportunities to seek support, but also to a new avenue for misinformation, incorrect views, and prejudices to spread. Once something is on the internet, it is like Pandora’s Box-you can’t put it back where it came from. Today, a non-insignificant portion of people believe that vaccines can cause autism, and avoid them as a result, even refusing to let their children get vaccinated. This is false information, coming from a single study by Andrew Wakefield and disproven for over a decade, and yet it is still considered true by many people, impacting lives long after it should have stopped (Davidson, Michael). This is just one example of how a single piece of misinformation can negatively impact people, and it would not have spread so far if it had hit 40 or so years earlier. Where before, humans got most of their information and news from newspapers and other limited sources that at least tried to confirm the facts, now platforms like twitter have led to large groups of people getting information from the

comments of those they “follow”, and those people are rarely experts on whatever they are sharing. Rumors and incomplete information get shared by one person, then another, and while some are word-for-word retweets, other times pieces get cut out or reworded, like a massive game of telephone. Not only does this provide an easy vector for misinformation on disabilities to spread, but opinions as well. If a prominent figure shares that they had an encounter with a disabled person and felt bad for them, the people who follow them take in the opinion that disabled people are flawed or might need help from “more capable” people, which can lead to the opinion that they are less capable than them, rather than simply having their own, different challenges. Just one person can influence the minds and opinions of countless others, and not always in a good way.

Building off from that, while many previous attitudes and treatments are viewed as outdated, it does not mean that new, problematic ones have not arisen in their place. One is the previously mentioned belief in a link between autism and vaccines, which led to the rise of the anti-vaxxer movement. There are people who have turned down measles vaccines that could potentially save their or their children’s lives, because they believe that the alternative is to risk autism. This is not something in the past either- during the recent COVID-19 pandemic, there were people who refused the vaccine for this reason. When people weigh loss of lives against a disability, and choose the former, there is clearly a problem.

The media often portrays mentally disabled people in a negative or inaccurate way. Although TV shows and movies are making a greater effort to acknowledge and include people with mental disabilities (insert data on increasing numbers of disabled people in media over time), many of these portrayals are problematic. For example, autism is a spectrum, but many

autistic characters are shown on the far end, with savant-like portrayals. A savant, according to the English Oxford Dictionary, is “a person who has an unusually high level of ability in a particular skill, for example in art or music, or in remembering things, but who has serious learning or social difficulties in other areas” (Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary), or “a person who is less intelligent than others but who has particular unusual abilities that other people do not have” in the Oxford Advanced American Dictionary. This is problematic because it pushes a false, damaging, inaccurate narrative. Other times mentally disabled people are made into stereotypes. This is problematic because people take cues from the world around them and can end up internalizing the incorrect information and images they see around them.

A great deal of progress has been made. The United States has traveled far from the days of almshouses and lobotomies. However, there is still a way to go.

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