Terms, Ideas, Definitions about „Disability“ in the Light of History

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Terms in the Past

„Mental Handicap“ – a history of heteronomy and suffering:

- moron = any stupid person
- moronic
- monster
- changeling child/ little monster
- idiot
- cretin
- stupid/ idiotic/ imbecilic
- mental defected/ feeble-minded person
oligophrenic
practically educable
mentally deficient
mentally retarded
mentally weak
burden for culture
mentally handicapped
moral cripple/ social parasite
Attitudes towards people with mental retardation (1)

cf. Wolfensberger 1972

- „subhuman beings“ (Luther; animals; Nazi-time: right to dispatch; Singer)
- „dangerous threats“ (individual and social danger, uncontrolled, violent, to be sterilized)
- „objects of scare“ (changeling; punishment of God; guilt complex of parents)
- „objects of ridiculousness“ (village idiots; figures of fun; fool at courts in the middle ages)
Attitudes towards people with mental retardation (2)

- "objects of charity" (afflicted by disaster and disease; support, to "carry the burden")
- "saints" (in cultures of central Asia and the Red Indians of North America; Children of God; respect; worship)
- "eternal children" (the permanent retarded; without any sexual needs)
- "invalids/ sick persons" (medical model: diagnosis and therapy; widespread thinking; compliance with prescriptions)
Shifts of thinking
Orientation/ Guiding Thoughts

- Concept of „Normalisation“
  - „living a life as normally as possible“
  - „self-realisation in social integration“

- Bank-Mikkelsen 1959/ 1972 Scandinavia
- Nirje 1974 Scandinavia
- Wolfensberger 1972 USA
Social Environment/ „Systemic-Ecological Concept“

- Interactions/ complex correlation
- Mutual influence & interaction/subjective perception
- Living in one world together with others/Co-world

- Bronfenbrenner 1981 USA
- Luhmann 1988 Germany
- Bateson 1972 USA/ GB
- Maturana/Varela 1984 Chile
„Empowerment“ and the Concept of „Autonomy“

Empowerment

Contextual, bio-psychosocial view of problems

Abolishing the caring mentality

Goal: self-determination

The disabled persons as EXPERTS of their lives/
professional carers as ASSISTANTS

Rappaport 1985 USA
Miles-Paul 1992
Theunissen 1995 Germany
Shifts of thinking – new terms

- people with special needs
- „so called“......
- person with mental retardation
- genetically impaired person
- people with learning difficulties
- human being with name: e.g. „Mrs. Miller“
Agreeing on a common definition of disability is not an easy task. Several attempts have taken place in the past years, at various levels.

Until very recently, the definition of disability has been determined by a medical approach. This approach was largely based on pity and charity towards disabled people, which should be “cured” in order to fit in society.
Since its establishment, the European Disability Forum has worked actively to overcome the medical model and to spread a notion of disability based on a social approach.

While the medical model is based on the persons’ “impairment” and “lack of ability”, the social model shifts the focus onto “disability” due to surrounding barriers.
While the medical model puts the responsibility on the “individual”, the social model stresses society’s responsibility to include and accommodate the needs of all persons, including people with disabilities.
Disability is therefore understood as the result of the *interaction* between the individual’s impairment and the barriers created by society (be social, environmental and attitudinal).
Disabled people represent 50 million persons in the European Union (10% of the population), the equivalent to the population of Belgium, the Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary and the Netherlands together.
One in four Europeans has a family member with a disability. Six Europeans out of ten know someone, in close or more distant circles, who has a disability.

People with reduced mobility represent more than 40% of the population.

Disabled people are two to three times more unemployed than non-disabled people.
Only 16% of those who face work restrictions are provided with some assistance to work.

Many disabled persons are ‘discouraged workers’ and don’t even attempt to enter the labour force. They are therefore classified as inactive.
The more severe the degree of disability, the lower the participation in the labour force. Only 20% of people with severe disabilities, compared to 68% for those without disabilities.

Non-disabled people are more than twice as likely to have reached third level education than non-disabled people.

One out of two disabled persons has never participated in leisure or sport activities.
38% of disabled people aged 16 - 34 across Europe have an earned income, compared to 64% of non-disabled people. Disabled people’s income is dramatically lower than the income of non-disabled people.
One third of the disabled population has never travelled abroad or even participated in day-excursions due to inaccessible premises and services.

Disabled people suffer from isolation. Compared to non disabled people, more than twice disabled people meet their friends and relatives less than one or two times per month.
And what do Europeans think about disability?

- 88% of Europeans consider that access to public transport for physically disabled people and blind people is difficult.

- 97% of Europeans think that something should be done to ensure better integration of people with disabilities into society. 93% express their desire to dedicate more money to the removal of physical barriers that complicate the life of people with disabilities.

(Sources: Eurobarometer survey 54.2 and Eurostat report: Disability and social participation in Europe, 2001 edition)