



The hidden history of learning disability

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Dorothy Atkinson:

I'm Dorothy Atkinson and I'm Professor of Learning Disability at the Open University

Victor:

My name is Victor, good morning everyone and welcome

The research that we're doing is about the hidden history of learning disability, its part of – a very important part of – our social lives but its mostly forgotten and so part of our research has been to unearth this and to bring it out in the open, and to talk to people who are involved and to portray it and to celebrate it in some way.

People with learning disability they're the same as everybody else – the only difference is they're a bit slower and some of them don't read or anything like that. But otherwise, they're all the same.

We started in 1997 with our very first conference and it's a bit experimental at the time because we were bringing together people who were historians and researchers and people with lived experience, people with learning disabilities who had actually lived through these times and we've just kept going ever since and its become an institution in its own right now .

Dorothy Atkinson:

Thank you Victor, just before we start there's as usual a few housekeeping rules that I need to say.....

It's a very revealing thing I think for historians to know that there's more than what was written down that there were people actually there – and some of these things we only know about because of oral history they're not accounted for in any other way.

Sue Dumbleton:

Okay that's that done – and thank you to Victor for his welcome. I'm Sue Dumbleton and I'm going to be co-chairing with Victor this morning. So I'd like to introduce to you our first speaker who is Deborah Cohen, Professor of History from Brown university in Providence, Rhode Island – North America, so Deborah has come a long way to be with us today, and Deborah is doing some research into family secrets so her research works in really nicely with the theme of our conference over the next couple of days and we're just delighted Deborah that you've been able to join us so over to you now...

Deborah Cohen:

I'm Deborah Cohen and I'm here for the Social History of Learning Disability Conference and the conference is about families and learning difficulties. I'm actually writing a book about family secrets in Britain from early in the 19th century to the present day and so what I'm interested in is the way in which families dealt with social stigmas among their own members, so what I'm really interested in is the ways in which disabled children and children with learning difficulties were treated in their families in the past and also now – so when they were hidden away and when they came out into the open.

Mabel:

My name is Mabel I'm 64 and I was in St. Lawrence's for 25 years. For me because the hospitals always say shut up and what have you, I didn't speak. I learnt to speak when I came out of the hospital.

What we've discovered is that – other conferences have people with disabilities as presenters, but what we pride ourselves on is that people now are operating as equals there's nothing tokenistic about it. People come in their own right and they take part as experts in their own right and they feel able to challenge things that they don't agree with that they know from personal experience are wrong.

I've been coming longer than Gloria. It's Mabel that got me into this. I enjoy it. It's very important and we enjoy coming very much. Years ago you would never see somebody with a learning disability doing this – it would never be, you'd never come across it.

Jane Abraham:

Hi I'm Jane Abraham and I work with Mabel Cooper and Gloria Ferris. The work that they've been doing on looking at their families has been really important for them to see where they fit into their families, but also for the groups that we've worked with, its started people thinking about their families and has brought up different things for people – things that are important, places they want to go people they want to see and the opportunity to see that they have a valued life even if they have a learning disability they are still really important to their family and friends.

So how many people were there in your family Gloria?

Gloria Ferris:

About 27 – don't shock! 24 lived. And did you have a good relationship with your family? I did and I didn't - cos I was never really at home a lot of the time only mainly weekends and holidays.

I didn't know there was anybody left alive, I really didn't. I thought that had gone a long time ago. But I got a picture of Victor – Victor sent me a picture of himself Of my mother. Yes. I got this picture that Victor sent me before I met him and I showed it – my father's still alive – and my father 's in his 80s now and I showed him Victor's picture and he said is it a brother that I don't know about because my dad and his sisters were given away. They were all born in the workhouse and they were given away, there was no record of them. They were just dispersed and Victor could have been a brother of his – Victor would be my dad's second cousin, but because I'm the generation afterwards, it's the second cousin once removed yeah. But it doesn't make any difference, we're still cousins aren't we – and we're family yeah, yeah, yeah.

Duncan Mitchell:

My name is Duncan Mitchell and I'm a Professor of Health and disability. We know that there are problems with oral history in that we don't always get an accurate picture but that's the sae with documentary history because somebody created the documents for a particular reason . And if we can have as many oral histories as possible we can begin to put things together, compare them to the documentary sources and then we get much nearer to what actually happened that just using a documentary source or just using an oral source.

What's also interesting though, is that some of their stories which weren't written down are now being written down by them and thee authority of the written word is something they really subscribe to – and they know what power it has on them because they've had their records kept over the years and they've been at the receiving end of other people's written comments so now their lives are actually written down in whatever format – sometimes on the website and so on – but sometimes they're in the format of a booklet or a chapter in a book and there's immense pride in that written word so it becomes an authoritative history as well as a spoken history =- and its not lost on people

Ladies and gentlemen, this is my book and if you want to buy it, its in Euro – for the book – if anyone is interested in buying that book I'd be very pleased to help you with that book and I know that you'd be able to read it perfectly because I have a lot of words in it...

Thank you Patrick

I suppose these conference actually enthuse people so people do go away and start doing a project of their own, people have come to do PhD's over the years – we started off actually our very first conference was in 1994 when we invited anyone we knew of in the whole country who we knew had an interest – there were about 12 people – and now we've got hundreds of people who are interested and its become international now, so we do have people who have come from Australia and Iceland and Ireland and various European countries so its become a worldwide phenomenon partly helped by the closure of the institutions and the feeling that we have to record that history before its too late.

People have a right for their stories to be told and it helps them. And I think that's very important. It also gives us some knowledge of what they went through so that we can make sure we don't make the same mistakes but it also gives us a way of looking at current services because things will be going wrong with current services and I happen to believe that its only with the historians eye that we can really see that because we loose that arrogance that you sometimes get within service that – that was then and its all alright now but we know it won't be and I think that its only by looking often in the past – that you begin to see those things.

Sheena Rolfe:

My name is Sheena Rolfe – I'm not very optimistic that you can learn specific lessons from history or that history will not repeat itself as a result but I firmly believe that we can go some way towards that> I really firmly believe that oral history needs to be combined with archival history and with photographic history so that all those different aspects combine to create a big picture so that we can learn a huge amount by revealing a hidden history especially one as brutal and as exclusive and isolating and hidden as the history of people with learning difficulties.

There's exciting news about both of them. Firstly Gloria has just completed a Leaders of Tomorrow course is that right Gloria, and you've qualified as a tomorrow's leader – so well done Gloria for showing people the way....
Congratulations...

Its still on the margins in some ways because although there's a move towards social inclusion its actually quite difficult for people to be included and to feel accepted and to feel part of what's going on so I suppose we're contributing towards that in lots of ways, because as people tell their stories they gain more confidence they start to make friends and there's something about them – they've become – some of the people who've been coming here, they've got careers now of their own and telling their stories and teaching other people and going to schools and in lots of different ways.

Oh I took over an organisation "People First" I was chair of People first in London and in Croydon...

But the importance of oral history over and over again comes home to me, that no matter how much you read documents or archives, or look at photographs, that tends to give you a victim – but when you hear the stories - what the oral history does is show you that people are not victims, they're survivors.

Its opened my eyes to corners of our social life – I thought I knew quite a lot, cos I used to be a social worker in this field but there's so much I didn't know – that I'm learning from it so I think its like the Open University itself – you go on learning, it's a life-long learning process and I'm still learning about it although its been an interest for so many years – there's still more to know.

And for Mabel we've just heard equally exciting news that Mabel's been awarded an honorary degree by the Open University in recognition of all the work that she has done to support students to finish their studies based on the life story that Mabel has told and Mabel will be collecting her degree next year at one of the degree ceremonies for the Open University – so well done Mabel...