ABSTRACT

Social Production of Intellectual Disability and the Mechanics of Moral Exclusion: Past, Present and Future

by

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The institutionalized dehumanization in the United States continues to allow for people who are categorized as intellectually disabled to be legally warehoused and paid as little as pennies per hour to complete rote, repetitive work within segregated environments. An entire court case was conducted about whether a man labeled as intellectually disabled was able to engage in a consensual relationship or whether he was the victim of sexual assault without ever allowing him to express his desires and lived experiences. This project is an attempt to explore a theoretical, historical explanation for how humanity is denied in some bodies, how humanity was denied in the body of the man at the center of this New Jersey court case. To understand this level of moral exclusion, this dissertation interrogates the discipline of psychology. Psychology is the subject of this project. This critical psychological work extracts data from the history of psychology itself. I interrogate the discipline of psychology and the concepts that have been constructed to wield immense power in the lives of those labeled as intellectually disabled. I follow the tracks left by psychological constructs in the world, into the courtroom in order to document how psychological concepts bleed into other areas and shape definitions of what it means to be human. I follow these tracks into The New York Times comments to trace how these ideas are reinforced and how they are challenged.
I investigate the social construction of intellectual disability by analyzing three distinct, yet inextricably connected, discursive sites. I excavate the genealogy of the formation of the concept of intellectual disability in the United States. I find that psychology was an essential and powerful player in the eugenic project and its effects continue to linger in the present. Following this historical foregrounding, through ethnographic reporting I introduce the complete court case. A Foucauldian analysis of the court case offers a complete institutional narrative of the social production of intellectual disability in the courtroom. This analysis of the transcripts and ethnographic notes reveals the way historical institutional knowledge moves into other spaces (legal, medical, educational, psychometric) and the way this type of knowledge influences how behavior is understood which then has a direct impact on what versions of possible explanations are taken into consideration. I found that within the courtroom, a particular version of psychology was legitimated, a version that has strong connections to psychology’s eugenic roots. This eugenic influence enabled for the evacuation of the man at the center of the court case. The final discursive site that the project moves into are the comments left by readers in The New York Times article about the case. Unlike the monologic presentation of truth during the trial, the comments are multivoiced, revealing tensions and ruptures. While there are dominant themes that resonate with themes found within the discipline’s eugenic past, it cannot be said that there is a convergence on a single truth.

Key words: Moral Exclusion, Social Production of Intellectual Disability, Accountability, Critical Wit(h)ness, Critical Construct Validity