



# Mental Retardation

James S. Payne  
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CHARLES C. MERRILL PUBLISHING COMPANY

A Bell & Howell Company

Columbus London Toronto Sydney

**Photo Credits:** The archives of the History of American Psychology, p. 172; Jeff Bates, p. 147; B. Blatt & F. Kaplan, from *Christmas in Purgatory: A Photographic Essay on Mental Retardation* (3rd ed.). Syracuse, N.Y.: Human Policy Press, 1974, p. 21; Rich Bucurel, pp. 142, 205; Celia Drake, pp. 191, 256, 276; Eugene E. Doll, p. 201; Julie Estadt, p. 384; Janet Gagnon, pp. 28, 212, 284; Larry Hamill, pp. 354, 367; E.B. Heston, State Printing, p. 254; Tom Hutchinson, pp. 54, 133, 226, 279, 309, 321, 324; Institute of Human Learning, University of California, p. 169; George T. Linyear, p. 380; Greg Miller, p. 160; Neil A. Miller, p. 92; Ohio Historical Society, p. 296; Resource Teaching, p. 220; Jeremy Rowe, pp. 69, 106; Andrew T. Scull, from *Museums of Madness*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979, p. 13; Ted Shenenberger, pp. 74, 80, 123; United Press International, p. 87; Dan Unkefer, p. 182; V/DIA-Editorial Photocolor Archives, p. 407.

Quotation on pp. 295-96 reproduced by permission of the Society for Applied Anthropology from *HUMAN ORGANIZATION*, 23(4):313-314, 1964.

Published by  
CHARLES E. MERRILL  
PUBLISHING COMPANY  
A Bell and Howell Company  
Columbus, Ohio 43216

This book was set in Helvetica and  
Antique Olive.  
Production coordination by  
Deborah C. Damian.  
The cover was prepared by Will Chenoweth.  
Cover photograph by Tom Hutchinson.

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publisher.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number:  
80-83939  
International Standard Book Number:  
0-675-08027-4  
Printed in the United States of America  
5 6 7 8 9 10/86 85 84

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Special education began with mentally retarded learners—because they were recognizably “different” from their peers. Thus, for at least 200 years we have been compiling a considerable body of knowledge about how retarded people learn, about how and what to teach them, about how we as a society treat our retarded citizens. Yet society is, of course, always changing. Recent events such as the development of systematic instructional techniques and the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142) have accelerated the rate of change in our field and made critical the need for well informed, well educated teachers of the retarded. Our purpose in this book is to give you up-to-date information on the characteristics of retarded learners, the causes of their retardation, its assessment, and available placement services and programming for retarded people from preschool age through the elderly. We’ve tried to digest the research and add what we’ve learned through our own experience. We present the results in a way that we hope is engaging, meaningful, and scholarly without being overly technical.

In teaching introductory students, we’ve often found them to be unenthusiastic about the mental retardation course. To combat this attitude, we’ve designed this book to be more useful for you as future teachers and other professionals working with retarded people. When possible, we try to show how understanding a given topic relates to teaching. For example, we’ve tried to show why definitions and prevalence figures are important to you; to “decode” many of the big words in the discussions of causes of retardation and relate them to the students you may eventually encounter in the classroom or residential setting. We’ve linked the learning characteristics of retarded students to suggested teaching strategies for them.

In addition, you’ll find short vignettes in each chapter that give you a real-life picture of the retarded, their teachers, and their communities. Like the text, these vignettes cover all age ranges—from preschool through adulthood—and all levels of severity—from mild through profound. Finally, the book progresses from a basic understanding of definition and causes to assessment, teaching procedures, and considerations of the mentally retarded individual in family and society. In sum, we have tried to pick the best of what we know about retarded people, and whet your appetite to learn more and to be a part of this changing, growing field.

We owe our appreciation to many people who helped us with the development, research, or production of this book. The creation of a book like this one takes considerable time, and so it is quite possible that we have overlooked some people in this acknowledgment, and to them we apologize. Nevertheless, there are several individuals to whom we are deeply indebted. We are especially grateful to:

- Linda Wilberger, our typist, for understanding the importance of early morning drop-offs and for diligently and patiently typing and retyping the manuscript.
- Francie Margolin, for her expert editorial work and for her dedication to this project.
- Various colleagues, especially Lori Inaba, Derrick Kobayashi, Maggie Morton, and Julie Smith, for assisting with library research, typing, and so on.
- Marianne Taflinger and Bill Lochner, at Charles E. Merrill Publishing, for their unending enthusiasm, support, patience, understanding and dedication to this book.

*J.R.P.*  
*J.S.P.*

*For our parents*

**Dorothy & John Patton  
Helen & Cecil Payne**



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# Historical Perspectives

Many significant events and people have influenced the development of the field of mental retardation, and a look at some of them seems an appropriate place to start. Historical reminiscing can be interesting and beneficial for at least two reasons—we can gain a better understanding of our present state, and we may knowledgeably plan for the future based on what we know from history (Mesibov, 1976). This chapter discusses what we feel have been the most significant and representative influences on the field of retardation. Since there is a significant amount of material which could be covered, inevitably some events and people will not be discussed. (For a more detailed discussion, consult Hewett and Forness, 1977; Kanner, 1974; and Maloney and Ward, 1978.)

While many of the gains in services for mentally retarded people have been due to the unending and devoted efforts of individuals, there have also been strong sociopolitical forces that most certainly have influenced the development of the field. Clearly, when studying history, we must appreciate the social climate of a given time. Simply stated, in the past, much of what has happened to mentally retarded individuals has been determined largely by sociopolitical forces. And it is no different today. Rappaport (1977), while referring to social sciences in general, captures the essence of these dynamics.

All of man's quest for understanding . . . can be shown to be influenced by social forces, mediated through personal values and beliefs. (p. 26)

Rappaport's idea of mediation can be extended one step further to include the ultimate conclusion about the influence of social forces—social forces affect the *actions* of people in history. Rappaport goes on to state that it is important to “recognize that applied social science and the human service professions are inherently *political*” (p. 26).

Thus the purpose of this chapter is to give you an appreciation of how social and political forces have affected our interactions with mentally retarded people, both in the past and today. In addition, we will attempt to establish a case for what we call a “recycling phenomenon.” Many issues which have received our attention in recent years may not be as new as they seem.

Many people also think that the issues facing special education today are new. But if you read the historical literature of special education, you will see that today's issues and problems are remarkably similar to those of long ago.

---

This chapter was contributed by James R. Patton.

Issues, problems, and ideas arise, flower, go to seed, and reappear when the conditions are again right for their growth. (Payne, Kauffman, Patton, DeMott, & Brown, 1979, p. 131)

Throughout this chapter, we will mention issues which were discussed and debated long ago. You may feel dismayed by the fact that so much time has elapsed and these issues still remain just that—issues, with no final “solutions” in sight. Consequently, this chapter has three objectives. First, we will focus on the historical context of “mental retardation,” giving you a glimpse of the sociopolitical influences that have determined where we are today and some recurrent themes expressed throughout the short documented history of the field. Second, we will present the “content” of history; that is, the names, dates, places, and events that are typically associated with history. Third, we hope to introduce you to the complexities of human services as they relate to programming for mentally retarded people.

## AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Phenomenologically it is difficult for people to recognize the social forces influencing their behavior, attitudes, and beliefs because these forces are often diffused and are mixed with the common-sense beliefs of the time. We cannot easily become “unstuck” in time, and we pay little attention to the importance of when we live on how we think. (Rappaport, 1977, p. 27)

While attitudes toward and treatment of mentally retarded persons can actually be traced back to ancient civilizations (including Egypt, Sparta, Rome, and China), for all practical purposes, the documented history relating to the mentally retarded is rather brief, approximately spanning the last 200 years. In order to appreciate how brief 200 years really is, let us refer to Sagan's (1977) “cosmic calendar” analogy, from his book *Dragons of Eden: Speculations on the Evolution of Human Intelligence*. Sagan compressed the lifetime of the universe into the timeline of one calendar year, with January 1 of the reference year representing the “Big Bang” and January 1 of the next year representing the present. Based on this timeline, the first humans arrive on the planet Earth at approximately 10:30 P.M., on December 31 (New Year's Eve). Continuing the analogy, the birth of Christ occurs at 11:59:56 P.M. of the same day and the birth of the field of mental retardation (nearly 2 centuries ago) arrives at 11:59:59 P.M. Certainly, this analogy exaggerates the point that the field of mental retardation is very young indeed. Looking at the history of services to mentally retarded people over this “short” 200-hundred-year period, we may be astonished at the changes that have occurred.

Figure 1.1 graphically depicts some of the significant events and people that have influenced the field in the last 200 years. This figure will serve as a guide, placing into perspective much of what is presented in this chapter. Even though we have arbitrarily partitioned this historical review into periods, in order to facilitate communication, we would prefer not to limit our review to specific time frames. Our time periods are “ball park” figures and should not be rigidly accepted as definitive.

Figure 1.1 is found on pages 4–5.

Accordingly, we can divide the history of the attitudes toward and treatment of mentally retarded people into nine periods. The nine eras are

- |                             |               |
|-----------------------------|---------------|
| 1. A state of confusion     | prior to 1700 |
| 2. The awakening            | 1700–1800     |
| 3. Nascent optimism         | 1800–1860     |
| 4. Disillusionment          | 1860–1890     |
| 5. Sounding the alarm       | 1890–1930     |
| 6. "On hold"                | 1930–1950     |
| 7. Reawakening              | 1950–1960     |
| 8. "Center stage"           | 1960–1970     |
| 9. A time for introspection | 1970–present  |

Before we proceed through the various periods, we must address the problem of terminology. Throughout this chapter, those who are called *mentally retarded* will be described in accordance with current systems of classification. While this terminology will help us maintain a consistent standard, we would be remiss not to mention that, historically, terms such as "fool," "idiot," "imbecile," "feeble-minded," "moron," and "mental defective" (among others) have been used frequently.

See chapter 2 for a more complete discussion of classification and labeling.

### ***A State of Confusion: Prior to 1700***

Before the 18th century, the concept of *mental retardation*, regardless of the name used to describe it, was enigmatic to a world that did not have a sophisticated knowledge base with which to understand it. As a result, people around the world held a wide variety of attitudes and perceptions toward the mentally retarded.

Basically, there was no consensus among Western societies as to who these deviant people were, why they acted the way they did, and how they should be treated. Different societies' responses to these questions ranged from treating mentally retarded individuals as buffoons and court jesters to perceiving them as demons or as capable of divine revelations. Evidently, throughout ancient history, different patterns of treatment developed, reflecting an overall confusion.

Throughout this early history and continuing until the early 1900s, when we refer to persons with mental limitations, we are specifically speaking of relatively severely handicapped individuals. "Mild" retardation as we perceive it today had not been defined and was not recognized in the true sense of the term. As Hewett and Forness (1977) mention, "the borderline retarded individual was not noticeably backward in a day when few could read and write" (p. 30). Most mildly retarded individuals blended into society without too much difficulty; it was not until the 20th century that mild retardation came to be recognized as a describable condition.

### *The Renaissance*

Before 1700, certain developments resulting from the Renaissance of the 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries created a new social climate that would eventually have direct implications for mentally retarded persons. Although the Renaissance was important to the world in many ways, Maloney and Ward (1978) suggest that two features were appreciably noteworthy.



**FIGURE 1.1** Major Events Influencing the Development of the Field of Mental Retardation

	PRESCIENTIFIC	PERIOD OF EMERGENCE	PERIOD OF REGRESSION
<b>SOCIOPOLITICAL FACTORS &amp; SIGNIFICANT EVENTS</b>	French & American Revolutions	1800	1880
<b>IMPORTANT INDIVIDUALS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Locke</li> <li>• Rousseau</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seguin</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Industrial Revolution</li> <li>• European Immigration</li> </ul>
<b>ORGANIZATIONS</b>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Association of Medical Officers of American Institutions for Idiiotic and Feeble-minded Persons</li> </ul>
<b>LEGISLATION</b>			
<b>LITIGATION</b>			
<b>MAJOR PUBLICATIONS</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>De l'education (l'itard)</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Idiocy and its Treatment by the Physiological Method</i> (Seguin)</li> <li>• <i>Hereditary Genius</i> (Galton)</li> <li>• <i>The Jukes</i> (Dugdale)</li> <li>• <i>On Idiocy and Imbecility</i> (Ireland)</li> </ul>
<b>PROGRAMMATIC DEVELOPMENTS</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1st residential institution: Abendburg</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Civil War</li> <li>• 1st residential institution in U S</li> <li>• 1st special class: Dresden, Germany</li> </ul>