From Dustbin to Disruption: Possibilities for Disability in History

Natalie Spagnuolo, York University

Goodey, C. F. *A History of Intelligence and "Intellectual Disability": The Shaping of Psychology in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Routledge, 2011). 393pp. $195.89 Hardcover.

Goodey, C.F. *Learning Disability and Inclusion Phobia: Past, Present, Future* (New York: Routledge, 2016). 184pp. $212.94 Hardcover.

Metzler, Irina. *Fools and Idiots? Intellectual Disability in the Middle Ages* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016). 256pp. $115.68 Hardcover.

In a 1994 chapter titled "Intellectual Disability and the Heritage of Modernity," historical geographer John Radford criticized the lack of scholarly interest in intellectual disability (ID).[1] Linking the general disregard for ID as an area of inquiry to the complicity of academic expertise in the social and economic oppression of those who bear this label, Radford argued that "our culture has not only marginalized people with an intellectual disability, *it has also marginalized the study of intellectual disability as a phenomenon.*"[2]

    A survey of the field shows that, well over twenty years later, this statement unfortunately still bears true: many Canadian historians and other researchers continue to neglect the subject of ID. And this is despite media coverage and grassroots history work that has exposed how people with an ID continue to endure, resist, and survive extreme levels of violence, degrading treatment, segregation, unfair labour practices, and institutionalization. The stigma and discrimination that surrounds ID, the ever-present issues of poverty and homelessness, high rates of sexual and other forms of violence, demand increased attention to these disability communities—to lives that too often are deemed "not worth living."

    This is why two recent works on ID by Irina Metzler and C.F. Goodey come as such welcome contributions, offering what Radford terms "vital islands of hope and inspiration."[3] Metzler's latest book, *Fools and Idiots: Intellectual Disability in the Middle Ages* (2016), addresses ID through close and comparative readings of medieval legal, cultural, medical, theological, and other texts, while Goodey's work from the same year, *Learning Disability and Inclusion Phobia: Past, Present, Future* (2016), focuses on the modern era. Written as a follow-up to his 2011 monograph, *A History of Intelligence and "Intellectual Disability,"* which explored 16th–18th century Europe, Goodey's new text builds upon this previous work, with some

forays into medieval and ancient periods. Together, Goodey and Metzler cover much ground throughout Western Europe and its history, seeking to fill some of the gaping holes in the historical knowledge of disability, and, in the course of doing so, they show indeed that "disability is everywhere in history, once you begin to look for it."[4]

Despite the seemingly specific nature of this historical sub-field, the questions of who exactly is being studied, and why, diverge in dramatic and politically and theoretically rich ways. This brief review article compares various approaches that have been applied to the study of ID, focusing on these recent works by Goodey and Metzler. The discussion seeks to demonstrate the political and ethical impact of key methodological disagreements, beginning with a broad overview of certain issues related to histories of disability, and ID in particular, followed by a closer consideration of these issues in relation to both these works. As we will see, it is possible to trace two recognizable stances towards ID which reflect much wider debates and complex histories in the disability movement and enable the assessment of the value of historical research to contribute to ongoing political projects.

"Usable Parts": Challenging Biomedical Narratives of Deficiency

As with many other academic fields that have roots in social struggle, disability history is an act of resistance; it is often about people and movements reclaiming the right to represent themselves and their culture by authoring their own narrative accounts. Grassroots communities of remembering—such as the Huronia Survivors Speakers Bureau in Ontario, which formed in recognition of the abuses that took place in Huronia and other sites of confinement for disabled people—provide a platform for survivor accounts that help validate experiential knowledge. The violence committed against those who were confined in psychiatric facilities, regional centres for people labelled with intellectual disabilities, and other institutional settings remains largely hidden from the public and overlooked in historical accounts. Worse, the assumptions around disability that once permitted these atrocities continue to stream unrefracted through contemporary policy and popular consciousness.

For many historians of madness and disability, writing history can be a direct means of contesting biomedical regimes that have defined their existences as "social problems," reducing their bodies to objects of medical gazes and policy management efforts. Kudlick tells us that the political goals that underscore this research have helped to distinguish disability history from the history of medicine,[5] so much so that even when disability is conceptually present in histories of medicine, it may be framed in a way that is not recognizable or useable to disability activists. Her warning that medical and disability history are distinct and mutually exclusive fields reflects an important source of tension among historians.

Writing from the other camp, Linker argues for more common ground, and demonstrates that that there are, nevertheless, medical history scholars who remain critical of dominant tendencies within their field. As Linker acknowledges, such medical historical accounts "frequently tend to back on the familiar frame of disease history."[6] Against such deficit-oriented models and dominant biopolitical interests, historians of madness and disability have asserted their own knowledges and practices which disrupt relations built upon the control of disabled bodies by experts. As such, they aim to undermine this wielding of biopower over disability. Yet, within a general context of ableism and disability exclusion, histories of ID are particularly marginalized. This marginalization parallels legislative standards that continue to deny decision-making rights to many labelled individuals (those deemed "legally incompetent" due to real or perceived intellectual impairments), forcing them to be represented by others and, thereby, creating more barriers to self-representation.

The question of capacity for self-representation brings us to the crux of the difficulty of historically conceptualizing and researching ID: by contesting capacity assessments, we are challenging the very medical definition of the ID community, which has been characterized by low "IQ" and an allegedly radical state of dependency. Framed as the antithesis to liberal humanist standards of citizenship (as independent, atomized, and self-sufficient), people with ID have been abhorred, punished, and condemned to the status of "absent" citizens.[7] For these reasons, historicizing intelligence is central to the political work of combatting ableism and reframing intellectual disability in more empowering terms. This work has been underway for some time by groups like People First of Canada/Personnes d'abord, but it has taken longer to catch on among researchers. From an academic as well as a practical perspective, unsettling static notions of impairment and ID involves placing the medical gaze in its socio-cultural context to reveal power dynamics that shape changing notions and standards of intelligence.

While Metzler and Goodey both employ predominantly Western European source material of impressive historical breadth and depth, their points of departure echo deep divisions in disability studies and activism that converge around and draw upon competing notions of embodiment and justice. Here, debates surrounding the material reality of impairment and its social origins must be recognized as fiercely contested terrain that shapes advocacy efforts in different and sometimes irreconcilable ways. While many of those involved in these conversations do acknowledge interactions between material and discursive systems and practices, others continue to view the two as mutually exclusive. Neither Metzler nor Goodey appear to subscribe to these dichotomies, yet the extent to which each author draws upon theories of ID as an embodied form of difference places their works in tension. As we will see, Goodey de-emphasizes the question of "real" intellectual impairments, while Metzler sets her premise upon the as-

sumption of this form of difference, challenging its fixity only in the subtlest of ways.

Measures and Markers: The Modern Origins of Intellectual Disability

Throughout *A History of Intelligence* (2011), and his most recent book, *Learning Disability and Inclusion Phobia* (2016), Goodey unwaveringly challenges the possibility of ID as a transhistorical condition that can be identified across time and culture. Underlying the historically contingent nature of ID are complex interactions between elite forms of self-representation and dominant forms of species-representation.[8] By emphasizing the modern and expert-driven nature of these inventions, Goodey shows how taken-for-granted labels, or "unstable categories," have come to define people with ID as a radical out-group.[9] The emphasis here is on the question of "who decides who has an intellectual impairment." People First of Canada/Personnes d'abord du Canada, the leading Canadian self-advocacy organization for people with ID, shares this concern with power differentials that unfold through labelling processes, and there is much in Goodey's work that can help strengthen advocacy efforts by people who are labelled with ID. Importantly, Goodey recognizes the presence of labelling in earlier historical periods. Thus, his strategy for debunking fixed notions of ID is not to deny that intelligence-based evaluations can be found in different historical contexts. Instead, he emphasizes the different ways in which intelligence has been conceptualized and the uniquely modern positioning of intelligence as the "core definition of the human species."[10]

Iterations of this thesis appear over and over throughout Goodey's writing. For instance, he shows that prior to modern Enlightenment thinking and the rise of capitalism, ID did not exist as a distinct and pathologized category. His work from 2011 and 2016 draws upon ancient Greek philosophy and traces ideas around intelligence through a range of Western European historical periods, pinpointing the absence of ID and related concepts of intelligence, as well as their appearance and articulation in eighteenth-century Enlightenment thought. Goodey deftly demonstrates that while intelligence has certainly been central to countless philosophical conversations at different points in time, different approaches to intelligence have also made it impossible to fully conceptualize and position ID as a marker of sub-human status. As we will see, Metzler completely rejects this idea, insisting that ID is far from unique to the modern period and is instead a category common throughout much of Western history. Her disagreement with Goodey turns upon their respective understanding of how impairment and disability interact with broader social structures as embodied forms of difference.

To fully appreciate Goodey's periodization of ID as a modern occurrence, we should consider political and economic systems that have shaped mate-

rial and cultural conditions and, along with these, the position of disability in so-
ciety. It is also helpful to recall how integral anti-capitalist critiques of normalcy
and medical pathology are to projects of disability recognition. For instance, it is
not uncommon to find claims that, prior to capitalist industrial development, dis-
abled people did not experience socio-economic oppression or pronounced
forms of marginalization based on fixed views of their identity—or at least not
to extent that they do today.[11] Along these lines, Goodey explains that intelli-
gence, as it has come to be represented in modern Western thought, did not exist
until the last three centuries.[12] Its emergence during that time was bound up with
classical liberalism's doctrine of self-government and its related obsession with
reason.

Crucial here for Goodey is the way in which intelligence—the inverse of
ID—functions as the defining characteristic of the human species. In his words,
"it is collective self-image and self-esteem alone that constitute what is currently
called intelligence—and therefore intellectual disability."[13] In this way, perceived
deficiencies in intelligence render one impure, animalistic, and unfit for species-
membership.[14] Reading ID through Marxist notions of commodification and
alienation, Goodey locates within this out-group the symbolic weight of alienat-
ing social and economic transformations that affect in-group members, arguing
that "learning disability [ID] and learning disabled people are thus projections of
its [the in-group's] own alienation and suffering."[15]

Importantly, however, Goodey does not view ID as "a mere social con-
struction," as he recognizes that there is an embodied dimension to certain dis-
ability experiences. Instead, his emphasis is on the relational and historical quality
of the concept and the changing importance placed on intelligence as a marker of
sub-human status. At the same time, he explores the shortcomings of certain
constructivist models of disability and challenges relativist approaches that leave
intact a stable impairment reality. According to this reading, the social experience
of disablement interacts with physical impairment(s), while "the thing itself, the
impairment, retains a more or less hidden reality."[16] Goodey tells us that while
this version of the social model of disability may serve the interests of certain
disabled people, it is simply not conducive for understanding the history of ID.
From his framing of ID we know that ID-related impairments have a "radically
historical character,"[17] and that these require a renewed emphasis on the social
quality of impairment. Questioning whether ID is even always linked to impair-
ment, he is also careful to avoid any denial of disability as material difference.
Goodey explains, "of course, learning disability sometimes has *some* connection
to the materialities of physical impairment, inasmuch as the brain may be differ-
ent."[18] However, he adds that this is not the point and instead directs the reader's
attention towards the relational quality of ID as it exists between the material na-
ture of the brain as organ and conceptions of intellect as an abstract quality, stat-
ing that "an additional explanatory link is needed, between the (impaired) material

substance of the brain and the (impaired?) immaterial intellect."[19]

No Golden Age: The Historical Continuity of Exclusion

The absence of any straightforward continuity in the social meaning of intelligence and ID as disability and/or impairment, to Goodey, makes transhistorical notions of ID identity nearly impossible. This is more than a methodological warning against presentism, as Goodey goes on to identify issues with projecting current assumptions about ID onto the past: "When we assume that in the distant past intelligence and its disabilities, under any label, existed in a sense we might understand them today, we turn a history that is rich and strange into a recital of our own prejudices."[20] Even though Goodey is careful to avoid "disability denial,"[21] one potential drawback of his formulation of the ID experience can be found in the fear, shared by many Mad and disabled people, of historical erasure—an erasure that is tantamount to reducing these groups to social constructions.

Metzler takes up this concern around the material reality of ID in *Fools and Idiots: Intellectual Disability in the Middle Ages*. Using a wide-range of medieval sources across different genres and disciplines, she demonstrates how ID has been conceptualized through the often-interrelated areas of law, theology, and popular culture, to name but a few examples. Yet, as noted above, her conclusions are strikingly different from Goodey's. For example, she parses catch-all terms such as "idiocy" and finds that they did give rise to/carry specific applications that denoted "permanent" or "congenital" disability, and specifically ID, and not simply broader social experiences such as illiteracy. More significantly, Metzler maintains that intelligence has always been valued as a marker of species-membership.

The material dimension of the impairment-disability axis serves as Metzler's clearest point of entry, and it is one that allows her to posit a "congenital" form of ID. She weighs in on the question of historical continuity in relation to impairment/disability identity, rejecting Goodey's thesis by affirming that people with ID existed well before the modern era. She supports this claim through a detailed exploration of intelligence-related terminology, its meaning, and, in some cases, applications in various contexts. These examples are intended to show that ID, or "knowledge as a tool with which to dominate others," has been around since antiquity.[22] In taking this track, Metzler goes so far as to accuse researchers like Goodey of "dreaming of a kind of golden age" where people with ID might have attained a higher level of social inclusion.[23] Unfortunately, her argument against these authors is underpinned by certain unexamined assumptions of her own which risk degrading people with ID. For example, in offering up statements that defend the complexity of medieval labour, Metzler contrasts these realities with the implied "simplicity" of people with ID to suggest that those disabled people would not have gone unnoticed. Addressing the "golden age" perspective,

she writes, "It demonstrates the assumption that less technological societies are overall less mentally developed, and therefore individuals with mental deficiencies within such a society would not be noticed."[24] Taken for granted here is the view that people with ID are "less mentally developed" and, that by association with this group, medieval patterns of life and labour are devalued as "less developed."

At work in Metzler's critique is an essentialist understanding of differences between people with and without ID. To suggest that people with ID would not have fit into *any* pre-modern environment due to an inherent inability to "keep up" implies some objective criteria of normalcy and normal human attributes. This provides an odd point of contrast to arguments that adopt the self-perception of these marginalized groups—narratives that often seek to support advocacy efforts by putting historical knowledge in the service of anti-essentialist struggles. In this regard, a key value of Goodey's operation is to de-stigmatize ID by pinpointing the social interactions and mechanisms that shape and simultaneously degrade ID as a form of social status.

Despite these possible limitations, Metzler's research into the medieval period can provide a basis to help anchor certain cultural understandings of people with ID as an oppressed minority group with a far-reaching history. The implication of her main point—that people with ID existed in the premodern past—is that disability oppression existed during this purported golden age. By showing that people with ID did not fare any better in the distant past,[25] she helps document forms of medieval exclusion, including the use of specialized institutions for people with ID,[26] and other efforts at segregation. Yet, the value of this evidence risks being overshadowed by Metzler's failure to engage with contemporary questions of identity. Her relative glossing over current injustices—at one point, she states, "I cite this to remind the reader how far, thankfully, we have moved on since then"[27]—makes it difficult to understand how, if at all, she positions her work in relation to ongoing struggles even as she points to possible antecedents of these structures of oppression in the pre-modern era.

Conclusion: Towards an Emancipatory Disability History

Metzler's work may be read as being grounded in a curiosity for "what really happened" and the scholarly pursuit of this purpose, and while this search can produce a lengthy inventory of knowledge about possible attitudes, offenses, and forms of resistance, its value is somewhat constrained when it is not used to directly challenge or at least illuminate contemporary issues. Such historical inventories and glossaries, which are entrenched in socio-political disinterest, may mean little for some advocates of change, looking to show other possible futures. But this is not to say that other, future researchers and activists cannot make use of her work and draw explicit connections to current battles waged by countless Mad and disabled people and their organizations. The distinction between med-

ical and disability history is a contentious one that is not necessarily shared by all practitioners.

Nonetheless, historians of madness and disability subscribing to Kudlick's approach may designate Metzler's account as a detached history that is missing a sense of political commitment to anything other than disproving the slipshod historical research of others. As Kudlick reminds us, it is a commitment to real-world value, balanced with historical theory, that helps distinguish disability histories from histories of medicine. Describing the important difference between medico-historical formulations of disabled people's lives and disability history, Kudlick writes, "the crux of the difference lies in policies, how explicitly political one thinks this study of history should be."[28] Recentring the hitherto marginalized histories on those who have been affected by these constructions, however, has the effect of recovering these experiences out from under the structures that have historically kept them hidden and out of sight.

NOTES

[1] Also referred to as "developmental disability" (in Ontario, Canada), "learning disability" (in the UK) and, in some contexts, by much more dated and offensive terms such as "mental handicap," "mental delay," and "mental retardation."

[2] John Radford, "Intellectual Disability and the Heritage of Modernity," in *Disability is Not Measles: New Research Paradigms in Disability*, eds. Marcia Rioux and Michael Bach (North York: Roeher Institute, 1994), 34 [emphasis in original].

[3] Radford, 36.

[4] Douglas Baynton, "Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History," in *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*, eds. Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 52.

[5] See Catherine Kudlick, "Comment: On the Borderland of Medical and Disability History," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 87, no. 4, (2013): 540–59.

[6] Beth Linker, "On the Borderland of Medical and Disability History: A Survey of the Fields," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 87, no. 4 (2013): 499–535, 502.

[7] Michael J. Prince, *Absent Citizens: Disability Politics and Policy in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

[8] C.F. Goodey, *A History of Intelligence and Intellectual Disability: The Shaping of Psychology in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 2.

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[9] Ibid., 3.

[10] C.F. Goodey, *Learning Disability and Inclusion Phobia: Past, Present, Future* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 13.

[11] For example see Brendan Gleeson, *Geographies of Disability* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

[12] Goodey, *Learning Disability and Inclusion Phobia*, 40.

[13] Ibid., 25.

[14] Ibid., 16.

[15] Ibid., 126

[16] Ibid., 62.

[17] Ibid., 62.

[18] Ibid., 61 [emphasis in original].

[19] Ibid., 61.

[20] Goodey, *A History of Intelligence and Intellectual Disability*, 15.

[21] Goodey, *Learning Disability and Inclusion Phobia*, 13.

[22] Irina Metzler, *Fools and Idiots? Intellectual Disability in the Middle Ages* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 104.

[23] Ibid., 174.

[24] Ibid., 20.

[25] Ibid., 131.

[26] Ibid., 186.

[27] Ibid., 169.

[28] Kudlick, 451.