

**SOCIAL PERCEPTIONS OF
PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES
IN HISTORY**

SOCIAL PERCEPTIONS OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES IN HISTORY

By

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Charles C Thomas

PUBLISHER • LTD.

SPRINGFIELD • ILLINOIS • U.S.A.

Published and Distributed Throughout the World by
CHARLES C THOMAS • PUBLISHER, LTD.
2600 South First Street
Springfield, Illinois 62794-9265

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ISBN 0-398-06837-2 (cloth)
ISBN 0-398-06838-0 (paper)

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 97-38919

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Printed in the United States of America
MS-R-3

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Covey, Herbert C.

Social perceptions of people with disabilities in history / by
Herbert C. Covey.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-398-06837-2 (cloth). -- ISBN 0-398-06838-0 (pbk.)

1. Handicapped--History. 2. Handicapped in art. 3. Handicapped
in literature. I. Title.

HV1552.C69 1998

305.9'0816--dc21

97-38919

CIP

To Marty, Chris, and Kelly

PREFACE

This book was written to provide an overview of major historical contexts and to describe how historical occurrences shaped the nature of disabilities. It introduces the reader to the topic of the social history of people with disabilities and provides basic background information on disability in prior centuries. It presents major notions for understanding general social trends regarding people with disabilities. The book provides an overview of some of the major trends that directly influenced people with disabilities. It was written to increase our knowledge and consciousness of presentations of people with disabilities and to fuel further inquiries on the topic. Many of our contemporary images and ideas about people with disabilities cannot be applied to people with disabilities who lived in earlier times. Other images and ideas can be traced back to earlier ideas about the nature of disabilities and the people who have them. It has been my hope to present the rich texture of presentation regarding disability from earlier times in such a way that images of people with disabilities are more meaningful to people with disabilities, scholars, and other readers of this book.

It provides a general survey of how people with disabilities were perceived in western history. It draws on art, literature, and historical information from earlier times. The span of time selected for study focuses on the Middle Ages through the nineteenth century. The period of the Middle Ages was selected because it represents a watershed of ideas regarding people with disabilities and significant changes in artistic representations of all people, including people with disabilities. In prior centuries individuals were relatively insignificant and artistic images were relatively sterile. The church exercised so much control over art and literature, that individuality found little representation. The Middle Ages represents a period of change in both artistic techniques and attitudes toward people with disabilities. It was at the close

of the Middle Ages that artists and authors began to portray the individual characteristics of people with disabilities. During the Middle Ages artists began to present detailed and individualistic characteristics of their human subjects. The late Middle Ages gave rise to the use of perspective, as human subjects began to be presented in natural contexts. The thirteenth through the fifteenth centuries saw increased effort to depict subjects as individuals and as they actually appeared (Hofstatter, 1968). People with disabilities were included in this shift but stereotypes and traditions continued to influence the manner in which artists and authors represented them. The Middle Ages also represent an interesting time regarding the social interpretations and relationships between people with disabilities and those without, although many people acquired disabilities during the life span.

When the Middle Ages came to a close and the Renaissance flowered, a new orientation on life developed. Life in this world took on a new importance. The focus on the individual that emerged with the Renaissance brought attention to people and their characteristics. Some of the humanist focus brought about by the Renaissance also affected notions and images of people with disabilities. As societies turned toward understanding humankind, a natural curiosity grew about people with disabilities. People with disabilities increasingly became the subject of art and literature. Art during the Renaissance and particularly that of the later northern Renaissance sheds much light on how people with disabilities were perceived and treated by their respective societies. The centuries that followed the Middle Ages and Renaissance were characterized by accelerated social change and social upheaval, which in turn caused dramatic changes in many perceptions about people with disabilities.

The study ends with the nineteenth century for several reasons. First, the nineteenth century represents century of great importance to people with disabilities. This was the century of Darwinism and major scientific breakthroughs that changed some of the paradigms used to interpret the nature of disabilities. This was the century that led to many reforms in the care and treatment of people with disabilities. It was the century that fostered some of the stereotypes about people with disabilities that have only recently been challenged in contemporary society. The study's scope does not continue through the twentieth century because there already exists a considerable body of information about people with disabilities during the twentieth century.

The twentieth century is one in which considerable legislative, medical, and legal materials are available. While the twentieth century is undoubtedly an important one, it needs to be addressed as a separate topic.

Some historians and scholars may take issue with the broad scope of this work, suggesting that significant details and subtleties will be lost in a book covering the Middle Ages and ending in the nineteenth century. They may also argue that each region, with its unique traditions and culture, or each of the periods or centuries encompassed in this book deserves intensive, thorough coverage in a separate volume. All of these points have merit but this work is not intended to be a detailed or period specific piece but an introduction to some of the basic presentations of people with disabilities over the centuries. Only by studying presentations and images of people with disabilities over such a lengthy period is it possible to determine whether these views and presentations were short-term or lasting. No other work presents such a broad social overview on which more detailed studies can be based. While there are many excellent texts on specific disabilities, works that cover a broad range are absent. This study is meant to be a survey of the social landscape and a catalyst for further research.

Although this book might, in the eyes of some, represent a sizable effort at covering the topic of disability, it in no way fully covers the topic. Nor does the book represent all of the experiences that people with disabilities have had over the centuries. Rather it, to borrow a cliché, only scratches the surface. Anyone who decides to study the topic should be prepared for great voids in information. Hopefully this study helps fill some of the previous voids.

HERBERT C. COVEY

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As an independent scholar, I do not have the professional contacts that academe affords. This makes the help I do receive even more important. In this regard, I am deeply indebted to the following people and their respective institutions for providing valuable assistance: Ulf Hedberg, Director of Archives, Gallaudet University Library; Kris McKusker of Special Collections and Marty Covey of the Western History Archives at the University of Colorado Norlin Library; Ms. Chantal Corr of the Colorado Department of Human Services; Ms. Alperine of the Institut National de Jeunes Sourds de Paris; Mr. Henk Betten of the Netherlands. I want to thank Dr. Steven Hey for his early suggestions and involvement in the conceptualization of this book. It almost goes without saying, the book would not have been possible without the assistance of many.

I also want to thank the following museums, publishers, libraries for their permission to reproduce the works included in this text including the Louvre, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Yale University, Prado, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Bibliothèque Nationale (Paris), Vatican Museum, New York Public Library, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, British Library (London), Oeffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel Kunstmuseum (Basel), The Harvard University Art Museums, Library of Congress, University of Colorado Library - Special Collections (Boulder), Wellcome Institute Library, (London), Springfield Museum (Springfield, MA), Museum of Naples, Kupferstichkabinett (Dresden), Birmingham City Museums and Art Gallery (Birmingham, England), Gallaudet University Archives (Washington, DC), Bayerische Staatsbibliothek (Munich), National Gallery of Urbino, Manchester City Art Galleries (Manchester, England), Yale Center for British Art, and the Cleveland Museum of Art.

I am also deeply appreciated of my spouse, Marty; my daughter, Kelly; and son, Chris. They are the real reason and source of inspira-

tion for why I do what I do. They have been tolerant and supportive throughout this study. Without them, I wouldn't have the support and encouragement so important to independent scholars.

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Limited literature in disability history, however, continues to pose a great challenge to students of disability studies in their endeavor to trace the development and formation of perceptions towards persons with disabilities. It is towards this end that this article seeks to present a coherent literature review on cross-cultural factors that influence perceptions towards children and adults with disabilities from a historical perspective. Diversifications in perception of persons with disabilities exist in Ghana as they do in other places in Africa. In addition to other perceptions, social attitudes towards persons with disabilities are reflected in the family, which teaches by example customs and institutionalized values. The number of people with disabilities is growing. There is a higher risk of disability at older ages, and national populations are growing older at unprecedented rates. There is also a global increase in chronic health conditions, such as diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, and mental disorders, which will influence the nature and prevalence of disability. Often people with disabilities are excluded from decision-making in matters directly affecting their lives. – Lack of data and evidence. Therefore it is vital to improve public understanding of disability, confront negative perceptions, and represent disability fairly. For example, education authorities should ensure that schools are inclusive and have an ethos of valuing diversity. Throughout history, people with intellectual disability were stigmatised, feared, persecuted and frequently mistreated. It wasn't until the mid to late 19th century that a more positive approach to people with intellectual disability began. It was around this time that institutions were established for people with intellectual disability. 19th Century. Many countries during this time were poor economically and social conditions were often difficult. This also reinforced fear and stereotyping by the general public, and had an impact on educating people with intellectual disability. However, as this is the first time in history people with intellectual disability are living into old age, there is very little understanding of their ageing experience, their thoughts on ageing and exactly how they age. These famous people with disabilities have overcome them to become leaders in their field and make their contribution to society. Find out more in this post. Since then, his achievements and challenges are an example for thousands of people. These are some of the best-known personalities at the international level and with the most famous histories of improvement, but every day, there are many similar stories surrounding us that we do not know about. Having the right equipment can make all the difference! Check out our range of manual wheelchairs and powered wheelchairs over on our website. Related Posts. Creating the career of your dreams. Disability on film: five films you might have missed. Who are the most decorated Paralympic athletes? Search How can studying this history help us understand the everyday lives of people with disabilities, their perceptions of themselves and society's perceptions of them? In colonial America, caring for people with disabilities was often a town's responsibility. Towns provided poor farms and almshouses as places to house and support those in need. Individuals with disabilities, criminals, and paupers were often lumped under one roof. The superintendents of the Johnson County Poor Farm and Asylum, which opened in 1855, argued that it offered good living and work conditions. However, these facilities