

## Disabilities and Civilizations

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### Abstract

Disabilities have been recognized for millennia. The roles and functions of individuals with disabilities of various kinds in civilizations should be explicated by archeology and anthropology. The greatest challenge is defining mental disorders, especially mental illness, in historical and cultural contexts.

### Disabilities and Civilizations

Disabilities of various kinds have been known to exist throughout recorded human history, and disabilities should be a topic of study in anthropology and archeology. Attitudes toward and treatment of humans with disabilities have changed through the ages, but only relatively recently (in the past few centuries) have they become a topic of serious study and concern [1-5]. Even more recently, beginning in the twentieth century, individuals with disabilities have become a matter of debate among psychologists, educators, and policy-makers [6-8]. Today, we recognize disabilities of many kinds, but this has not always been so. We also know that disabilities are dealt with in a variety of ways depending on cultural values and conventions. Cultures disparage and value disabilities of different kinds in very different ways. Anthropology can help us better understand these cultural differences. Before the invention of modern medicine, many children with the most serious deformities and diseases did not survive long. In ancient societies, they were typically abandoned or otherwise killed. Nevertheless, some did survive and were cared for in some way. Deafness, blindness, lameness (disability in physical health or movement), and disease causing disabilities (e.g., leprosy) are conditions recognized BCE. Mental illness was seldom recognized for what it is [3].

Physical disabilities involving sight, hearing, and movement were among the disabilities most understandable and surmountable before the nineteenth century. Of course, multiple and severe disabilities (e.g., deaf-blindness, quadriplegia) were exceptions that

strained or prohibited whatever accommodations were required, and relatively little is known about how they were handled. However, disabilities involving mental anomalies presented the greatest difficulties in understanding and appropriate accommodation, as remains the case today. What we recognize today as intellectual disability (formerly known as mental retardation) and mental illness have always been the greatest mysteries and have prompted the greatest differences in explanation, diagnosis, categorization, and treatment over the millennia of human record [3,9]. Mental acuity and lack thereof, as well as mental illnesses of various kinds (e.g., delusions and hallucinations, including what today might be diagnosed as a form of schizophrenia) has sometimes affected royalty or political leaders for millennia. Especially during the middle ages, the nobilities' "fools" and "jesters" were sometimes people with mental disabilities. For the most part, however, people with various mental disorders were simply secluded and protected from public abuse or were relegated to performing societies' most menial tasks. In the era of asylums, they were typically kept in institutions, away from the "normal" populace, partly for their own protection and partly for the protection of the larger society.

Today's emphasis on rights and inclusion of individuals with disabilities seems enlightened in many ways [10,11]. Nevertheless, any social policy can be taken to a harmful extreme, as Kauffman et al. [8] have noted. Perhaps failure to recognize and call out the mental illnesses of contemporary political leaders is one

weakness of twentieth- and twenty-first-century civilizations. In a sense, civilizations have not advanced far in recognizing and limiting the abilities of leaders of nations and tribes to use their mental disabilities (hallucinations, delusions, phantasmal visions and desires) to develop a following and ideology. From its origins BCE, human history informs us of the prominent role of madness (mental illness) in forming and leading civilizations [3]. The roles and functions of disabilities of various kinds, including what is called “mental illness” in today’s terminology, need explication by anthropologists and archeologists. The histories of medicine and its specializations (especially psychiatry), psychology, psychopathology, sociology, education, and government all stand to benefit.

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