

Stigma toward the mentally disabled

Business



Unbeknownst to the vast majority of people, stigma plays a role in the lives of every individual, determining their opportunities and future. Stigma, by definition, is a mark of incompetence that is associated with a particular category of people, that causes outsiders to assume they have superiority. Seemingly, this is a rare phenomenon that is only observed in rare cases, but truthfully, everyone is guilty of creating or believing in false assumptions that can potentially hurt others. Simultaneously, people are distributing personal judgements to the public whilst receiving other peoples' thoughts on themselves, thus creating an endless cycle of negativity.

It is thanks to stigma that supposedly great nations suffer from atrocities such as racism, sexism, and religious intolerance. However wrong it may be, this occurrence forces individuals to lead their lives under the pressure of the expectations of their presumed placement in society, and have no opportunity to gain freedom from these stereotypes. In the novel, *Flowers for Algernon*, by Daniel Keyes and modern day resources, the authors use the stigma surrounding intellectual disability to explore the various ways in which perception affects different aspects of life. In the article, “Workplace Stigma Toward Employees with Intellectual Disability: A Descriptive Study,” by Maureen E. Gormley, and the aforementioned novel, the writers explain that having a mental disability can create hardship when they are searching for employment due to workplace stigma. In the modern era, jobs determine social status, so when one cannot maintain an occupation, it impacts the rest of their lives.

For people suffering mental disabilities, it is rare to be provided with the chance to get a job because, they are seen as unreliable workers due to

stigma. This is proven in the article when it is stated, “ Prior to their [subjects with intellectual disability] arrival in the work unit, participants [workers without intellectual disability] reported skepticism of the youth’s ability to perform work tasks and interact effectively. As expected, the youth were met with overall low expectations for their performance... However, as the youth arrived in the workplace, participant perceptions changed. The youth presented as eager to work, pleasant, engaging, and motivated” (Gormley 254). The reasoning for the limited supply of jobs for people who are mentally handicapped is the way they are looked upon by society.

Despite this, when they are actually given a chance, they are able to negate these accusations, and show their full potential. The way they are perceived masks any good qualities that they may have to offer. The ideas present in the article coincide with the events of *Flowers for Algernon*, in the sense that Charlie Gordon, the main character, struggles to achieve a higher status in his workplace at the fault of his handicap. Charlie works in a bakery where he carries and delivers cases of flour to and from required locations. This is an occupation that does not pay well or gain him respect amongst peers, but it is the only task people assume he can do.

However, when what starts off as a small office prank, actually serves as the chance that he needed to prove his capabilities, he causes his co-workers to realize that he is more capable than they originally assumed. This crucial event is explained when Charlie writes in his progress report, “ Frank Rielly said if Charlie works the mixer he might fix it good so we will have all day off... and I said I couldn’t fix it but I could work it because I been watching Oliver since I’ve been got back. I worked the dough mixer and everyone was

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surprised” (Keyes 34). At first, it is seen that Charlie’s fellow employees are assuming that he will break the machine, which serves as a prime example of stigma. Because he is mentally disabled, he is assumed to be careless enough to damage the expensive tool. Then, even though they think he will fail, he sees a chance to prove them wrong, successfully operating the dough mixer and creating shock throughout the building.

The same situation occurs in the experiment from the article; the mentally disabled are expected to be irresponsible, but when they are able to show their true ability, end up proving the outside party wrong. Having a mental disability affects what occupation and status will be held, and only when stigma is overlooked, can they prove themselves and break free from restraining stereotypes. In *Flowers for Algernon*, and the article, “How We Like to Live When We Have the Chance,” by Marthese Degura, Omar Jelassi, Brian Micallef and Anne-Marie Callus, the authors teach that the stigma surrounding mental disability prevents individuals from being able to safely interact in social settings, as well as maintain unharmed friendships. There is great importance in having an active social life, as it widens the view one holds on the world, but for those who are intellectually handicapped, connecting to the outside world can cause them to get hurt. Many cruel individuals see them as easy targets due to the fact that they are perceived as clueless, making it hard for them to put trust in others.

A group of people with cognitive impairment called the “Consultative Committee of Persons with Intellectual Disability,” banded together to write an article explaining to the public the difficulty they face with social activity. In one instance, they explain the hardship of finding friends, writing, “Some
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people like to go out only with persons with intellectual disability. This is because others make fun of us and do not treat us well. But it is important to distinguish between those people who help us and those who do not” (Degura et al 125-126). There are certain people out there who bully those with intellectual disability because they want to look more capable and clever in comparison to those they claim to be friends with and they believe it is amusing to taunt those who are less fortunate. For the happiness of people with mental handicaps, it is necessary to eliminate all sources of negativity that reside in their lives that make them more miserable than need be.

The idea of the mentally disabled having artificial friends that make fun of them presented in the article draws strong parallels to the novel. Charlie has difficulty finding comfort in social settings because, the people he calls friends only keep him around so that they can laugh at his various blunders. This can be observed when he gets pressured into attending a party, and is given alcohol against his will. The events of this gathering are explained when Charlie writes, “ He [Frank Rielly] pushed me up close against her...

I fell three times and I couldn’t understand why because no one else was dancing. And all of the time I was tripping because somebody’s foot was always sticking out... They laughed harder every time I fell, and I was laughing too because it was so funny... I never knew before that Joe and Frank and the others liked to have me around just to make fun of me” (Keyes 41-42). The fact that he is being forced to dance with a girl, and is constantly being tripped by his “ friends” makes it evident that stigma is allowing them to assume that this is an acceptable act.

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They cause and laugh at his misfortune, but Charlie initially does not see that they initiate the situation because his disability creates a filter that makes it so he can only view them as his friends. But eventually, he is able to distinguish the difference between true friendships and those who use him for their own amusement, just as the individuals from the article have learned is a necessity. Social interactions can negatively impact those with intellectual disability more than the average person, and make it hard for them to find and to maintain friendships with trustworthy people who will not take advantage of them. Both in the novel, and “ The Sexual Knowledge, Experiences, Feelings, and Needs of People with Mild Intellectual Disability,” by Marita D. McCabe and Robert A. Cummings, stigma creates a trial for people with mental handicaps to maintain an intimate relationship.

It is common for many to desire a romantic relationship, it is also significant that they find somebody who they are able to confide in fully, and share their life with. For people who suffer mental disability, it is hard to maintain a close relationship because they lack basic knowledge on the topic. This misunderstanding deepens the stigma around mental disability and leads more people to believe that they are incapable of love. The idea that these people have limited sexual cognition is proven in the article when it is stated, “ The subjects of this study, who had ID were less likely than the student group to have felt close to someone or been in love with someone... There was a lack of knowledge among people with intellectual disability regarding intimacy, and they were likely to think that it is alright to have sex with everybody” (McCabe and Cummings 15-16). It is explained they have little experience with romantic emotions, and have falsely assumed that is socially

acceptable to have a long list of lovers. This makes outsiders feel as though people with ID are not trustworthy enough to sustain a sturdy long-term relationship.

This aligns perfectly with the theme of intimacy in *Flowers for Algernon*, specifically Charlie's inability to differentiate his feelings for Alice and Fay. Charlie is completely in love with Alice, but has not learned to handle such emotions, and as for Fay, he essentially used her for sexual intercourse. This is evident when he writes, "What I have with Fay is different from my relationship with Alice... I do not love Fay, I love Alice... I went home and made love to Fay, but kept thinking about Alice" (Keyes 235-236).

He is able to notice that his feelings for the women are not the same, but he continues to pursue Fay and not the women he loves because he is unaware as to how relationships truly work. The fact that he interacts with Fay the way he does, furthers the stigma regarding the mentally disabled's ability to follow through with romantic interest. When suffering intellectual disability, it is exceedingly difficult to maintain an intimate relationship with people they wish to pursue. The authors of *Flowers for Algernon*, and modern day resources write of times when an individual suffers from intellectual disability, and the impossibility to escape the stigma that surrounds them, and how it impedes their opportunities to better various aspects of their lives. Society is at fault for the wrongful identities that have been branded on to those who suffer intellectual disabilities.

As a whole and in order for the world to progress, stigma toward every classification has to be a less common occurrence. The mentally ill are

perceived by society as off putting and idiotic, but it is time that people stop categorizing others by their appearances and disabilities, and start considering the good that people can bring to the world.