



EPISODE 46: THE HISTORY OF DISABILITY, LESSONS FROM THE PAST

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Presenter: Larry Logue, Senior Fellow, Burton Blatt Institute

Host: William Myhill, Director of Legal Research and Writing, Burton Blatt Institute

VOICE-OVER ANNOUNCER: Blog Talk Radio. (Music) Welcome to WADA ADA Live! Talk radio. Brought to you by the Southeast ADA Center, your leader for information, training and guidance on the Americans with Disabilities Act. And here's your host.

WILLIAM MYHILL: Good afternoon and welcome to WADA ADA Live! On behalf of the Southeast ADA Center, the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University and the ADA National Network, I want to welcome you to the 46th episode of ADALive!

My name is William Myhill, the Director of Legal Research and Writing for the Burton Blatt Institute. Our topic for today's show is History of Disability, Lessons from the Past

As a reminder, ADALive! listening audience, if you have questions about the history of disability, please submit them at any time on our online forum at ADALive.org.

Now, it's my pleasure to introduce today's speaker, Dr. Larry Logue, senior fellow at the Burton Blatt Institute, Larry Logue comes from BBI from Mississippi College where he was professor of history and political science. Since winning the Francis and Emily Chipman Best First Book Award for *A Sermon in the Desert: Belief and Behavior in Early St. George, Utah*, Dr. Logue has turned his interest to the experiences of soldiers and veterans of the Civil War. His books include: *Race, Ethnicity and Disability: Veterans and Benefits in Post-Civil War America*, and *America and to Appomattox and Beyond: The Civil War Soldier in War and Peace*, and the *Civil War Soldier in War and Peace: A Historical Reader*, and also *The Civil War Veteran: A Historical Reader*.

At BBI, Dr. Logue collaborates with Dr. Blanck, exploring the psychological traumas suffered by Union Army veterans. This investigation will culminate in *Civil War Veterans, Psychological Illness and Suicide: Lessons from the Past*, a new monograph in Cambridge's Disability Law and Policy Series.

Larry, welcome to our show.

LARRY LOGUE: Thanks for having me.

WILLIAM MYHILL: The passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, the ADA, has often been called a turning point in history of people with disabilities. In honor of the ADA anniversary, which is July 26th, in this episode we are looking at significant turning points in the history of disability in America. First question for you is, why is it important in the 21st century to study disability in the past?

LARRY LOGUE: I might best start with a short answer, which borrows from Michael Crichton novel, there a character says "If you don't know history, you don't know anything." That's kind of a blunt assessment but it makes a useful point about the cost of not studying the past.

A more positive way of looking at your question is to think about the Latin roots of the verb "comprehend." Those roots mean "to grasp together." Why that is useful is history lets you grasp things together to see the forest and the trees, to see the big picture and details of human actions. And what is equally important is history lets us see the range of possibilities of what people are capable of, for better or worse, good or for ill. And what's more, history offers responses when somebody says, why don't we do this? Why don't we try that? And maybe we can say, it's been done before. That's just an overview, and I'll have more details on the same question as we deal with more questions.

WILLIAM MYHILL: Thank you. So the passage of the ADA has been called a turning point in the history of people with disabilities. Can history's big picture show other turning points?

LARRY LOGUE: Well, if history was driven only by dramatic events like the ADA, it would be a whole lot easier to explain it, it would be a whole lot neater. The turning points like that, like the ADA, like the Battle of Midway and World War II and maybe the Emancipation Proclamation in the Civil War are pretty rare. What is more common is what we might call turning periods. They're not sudden and not singular. They're actually collections of developments that come together and sweep through periods of years and produce big changes.

Let me give you particulars on one subject period, and that's the time around the turn of the 20th century, often known as the progressive era.

There, there were a bunch of development that came together, and they include a surge of faith and science and expertise, and people's ability to identify problems and solve them. A dramatic growth of industrial production. And especially progressive

obsession we efficiency and productivity in the industrial process. And finally there was a surge of immigration in the United States by people in numbers that never had been seen and places that hadn't been seen much either, like nations of -- especially nations of southern and eastern Europe.

The big changes that these developments produced for people with disabilities were these: For new professions, that is, ones that had been inspired by progressives' fascination with science and expertise, people with disabilities represented an opportunity for just about everybody else, they represented a threat.

And so I'll say more about the threat first.

The main effect of this perceived threat was that governments imposed policies of discrimination at all levels. Cities, for example, passed ugly laws. These prohibited people with visible disabilities from being seen in public spaces. States passed laws that prohibited people with disabilities from marrying. Other laws authorized forced sterilization of women with disabilities. And the federal government got into the act too. They adopted a policy that turned away immigrants at the ports of entry if they had any sort of alleged defect, which could include things like curvature of spine, eye disease, short stature and a whole long other list.

Professionals, on the other hand, took a different view. They could reduce the threat posed by disabilities. One way they could do that applied to people with mental illness. The former persuaded states to replace smaller asylums that confined people for short periods with large custodial hospitals, the goal being to remove chronically mentally ill people from society.

Another way they could reduce the threat was to deal with the threat allegedly posed by deaf people. Schools brought in professional educators who taught lipreading and speaking aloud instead of sign language. The goal here was to make deaf people fit in better.

Progressives also believed that they could reduce dependency on the part of people with all kinds of physical disabilities. The formers and medical professionals went on a campaign of rehabilitation, first for veterans and civilians, federal and state governments provided money for employment training, for prosthetics, job placement and for a little preaching about the value of work. The idea here was to create economic productivity from people with disabilities.

All these changes together were part of the full takeover by the medical model, which is, I'm sure you know means that disability was seen as a pathology that needs to be treated. It means more basically that disability was a condition of the individual, not

society. And if I had my own druthers, I might call it the individual model because that gets to the heart of what was seen as the nature of disability.

All this is what I mean by a turning period, big changes happened but over years rather than a single event.

WILLIAM MYHILL: Thank you. It's interesting to me how you, in describing can progressive era, mix in issues of threats as well as the more positive movements regarding helping individuals with disabilities perhaps get into the workforce. I'm just wondering on a side what you might say about the eugenics period which you did discuss but didn't use that actual term.

LARRY LOGUE: Yeah, the eugenics movement was one of the large things that progressives embraced because they were concerned about the purity of the race, the purity of the white Anglo-Saxon race, so the sterilization laws, marriage laws in particular were some of the more -- I don't know, more noticeable examples of what the eugenics movement produced. So it was another part of the progressive era. We could do courses and books, and have been done, on that era. And those are some of the highlights.

WILLIAM MYHILL: Thank you. So thinking of these turning periods, should the disability rights movement of the 1970s and '80s be considered a turning period?

LARRY LOGUE: They certainly can. The advocacy and the protests of those years certainly did shake the foundation of the medical model at last. It convinced people in power that society creates disability and society can tear it down. And that's true enough in its outlines, but historians have recently questioned the narrative that is usually attached to this movement. The standard narrative goes kind of like this: That prior to the 1970s, activism certainly existed but it was fragmented, consisted of mostly separate groups representing separate disabilities and they couldn't get much done because of that. But then, according to a standard narrative, the civil rights and the women's movement came to the rescue and inspired disability activists to put aside their differences and the disability activists copied the tactics of these other movements and got their victory.

The problem with this is it gives a misleading picture of activism for disability rights. For one thing, it overlooks the pioneering use of activist tactics, such as and in particular a group with physical disabilities that staged sit-ins to protest job discrimination in 1935, long before such movements became -- and tactics became popular.

For another thing the standard narrative overlooks a couple other realities. One is existence of groups like the American Federation of the Physically Handicapped,

organized in 1940 and demanded the right to employment for all people with disabilities. Another reality is divisions in other Civil Rights Movements, and African American rights, there was a deep division between those who fostered legal strategies, such as the NAACP versus those who favored direct action as the student coordinating committee. And there were those that favored public advocacy versus those who favored private consciousness raising.

If we expand the narrative by recognizing these realities we make clear there was a prolonged struggle, actually, rights for multiple groups in America, African Americans, women and people with disabilities, and expanding the narrative in that way suggests that what happened was that actually the audience changed in the last third of the 20th century. Finally, there was a critical mass of Americans who were willing to see stigmas of race, gender and disability for what they are. They're substitutes for rational thought.

So last third of the 20th century was really a time of big changes, just like the accepted wisdom says, but the historical approach enriches the narrative and does justice to the prolonged struggle for rights.

WILLIAM MYHILL: Thank you, Larry. ADALive! listening audience, if you have questions about the history of disability, please submit at any time on our online forum at ADALive.org. Now let's pause for a word from our sponsor.

VOICE-OVER ANNOUNCER: The Burton Blatt Institute known as BBI reaches around the globe in efforts to advance civic, economic and social involvement of people with disabilities. BBI builds on the legacy of Burton Blatt, former dean of Syracuse University School of Education and a pioneer in disability rights scholar. Burton Blatt was a pioneer in humanizing services for people with disabilities. Advocate of mainstreaming people with disabilities he had family support services to better lives of people with disabilities. BBI has offices in Syracuse, Washington, D.C, and Atlanta. To learn more about the Burton Blatt Institute, visit their website at bbi.syr.edu.

WILLIAM MYHILL: Welcome back to our show. We're talking with Larry Logue, senior fellow at the Burton Blatt Institute. Larry, the research you've done with Peter Blanck focuses on Civil War veterans. Where do they fit in the themes you discussed?

LARRY LOGUE: Peter and I looked at several topics over our time together. One is the administration of the federal government pension system for union veterans. Another is the experience of veterans themselves in navigating that pension system. And the most recent investigations have been the expense of veterans and psychological aftereffects of the Civil War. The main finding is veterans have long

been supposed to be outside of the perception of disability. But that they couldn't escape the larger forces affecting people who had disabilities.

What I mean is that Congress, relying on various motives from sympathy to political pandering tried initially to reverse the meaning of disability. From a perceived effect to be corrected under the medical model to a symbol of sacrifice to be rewarded with income support after the Civil War.

The overall numbers suggest that there was success in achieving this goal. At the turn of the century, within 300,000 Union veterans were on pension rolls, receiving pension support for awarded disabilities. But those numbers conceal unequal treatment. African Americans were less likely approved for pensions even when they had the same conditions. And concerned about the racial purity of America that I mentioned a minute ago, increased in the late 19th century. Immigrants and people from southern and eastern Europe in particular were also less likely than native whites to be approved. So there were clear limits to veterans' immunities from 19th century attitudes.

And there's another way that Civil War veterans weren't a privileged class and that's the subject of our forthcoming book. Some veterans suffered sleeplessness, anger, flashbacks and other symptoms caused by brain injuries, experienced as prisoners of war, traumas on the battlefield, and psychological distress like that is hard to quantify for the 19th century, but from censuses and pension records, it appears Union veterans experienced more mental illness than civilians did.

Another indicator of the war's aftereffects is not so hard to measure. We also found numerous Civil War veterans who died by suicide. They were driven by causes such as wounds that wouldn't heal, diseases that wouldn't go away and traumatic memories that wouldn't stop.

All these forces drove large numbers of Union veterans to suicide. Indeed, they seemed to commit suicide at higher rates than civilian men did then and higher rate than veterans do now at a time that is perceived as a major crisis.

So maybe policymakers did reverse the meaning of disability as a symbol there was less success in changing disability as an experience for veterans themselves.

WILLIAM MYHILL: Did veterans' disabilities from later wars have similar experiences?

LARRY LOGUE: Part of what happened in the 20th century after the Civil War was a reaction against policies of Civil War veterans. Progressives knew the government

compensated Civil War veterans for lost earning power and offered soldiers residential care. But progressive reformers believed those things, those policies encouraged idleness and dependency and those results were deeply offensive to progressives' commitment to efficiency and productivity. So they saw coming of a new war as a chance to start over and get it right. So the federal government threw its weight behind the philosophy of repairing disability through rehabilitation. This time pensions for World War I veterans were tied to a federal rehabilitation program. The program wasn't without serious problems. There were long delays in getting into programs. There was discrimination against African Americans. There was a focus on manual labor no matter what the skills that a veteran had, but the big change was here to stay. After subsequent wars, rehabilitation remained the top priority.

Those are the big change out of World War I and leader wars, is veterans with disabilities began to form their own organizations. Groups like the Disabled Veteran Americans formed in 1920sand Blinded Veterans Association formed in 1945, campaigned for government funding and programs for veterans. They helped veterans applying for government aid, and they argued against programs that treated veterans and civilians the same.

That split between veterans and civilians has caught the attention of some commentators and they argue that veterans' self-promotion held back attempts to obtain their own rights. This is assumed rather than investigated. We don't know how much effect veterans' examples had on civilians and we don't know the effect of veterans' efforts to change the minds of employers and the public and politicians about disability as societal problem, not an individual one.

So there were big changes for veterans and they beget big changes for us, big questions for us, actually.

WILLIAM MYHILL: Thank you. So what unanswered questions would you like to see explored by historians of disability?

LARRY LOGUE: Well, we could start by following up on the last point. Maybe we need more research on the relationship between veterans' rights campaigns and the larger disability rights movements. As I suggested, there's lots of research already on veterans' role in solidifying the medical model especially through rehabilitation and research on setting themselves apart from civilians, but is there evidence that veterans' activism might have inspired civilians? There's room here I think for investigation. Especially since a recent book points out that the American Federation for the Physically Handicapped was aware of the importance of World War II veterans to their own cause.

Another items on my wish list would have to do with the meaning of disability. We know that 19th century censuses collected information on various kinds of disabilities, as reported by household heads, and other informants. There's lots of problems with the results in those censuses. They're inaccurate, often incomplete. But the problem actually can be turned into usefulness. What could be done is that we could find evidence of an individual's disability in some other source, like a newspaper report of an accident. And then to see whether his or her disability was recorded in the next census. The point would be to see whether objective and subjective definitions of disability differed and to see whether they differed by race or gender or ethnic background.

All this could give an idea of various meanings of disability. So I guess I'm coming back to my initial point that the history of disability has come a long way, but by grasping things together, there is still a long way to go.

WILLIAM MYHILL: Larry, thank you so much for being with us today. This episode and all previous ADA episodes are available on our website at ADALive.org. The episodes are archived in a variety of formats, including streamed audio from our website, accessible transcripts of audio, and also are available to download as podcasts to listen at your convenience from your mobile device. Just select the download podcast from our home page and all episodes will be downloaded to your iTunes or preferred podcast manager.

I want to thank you for our ADALive! listening audience for listening today. We are thankful for your great support and listening in the series for this ADALive! broadcast.

Reminder: You can submit any questions on any of these topics by going to ADALive.org. Join us August 2nd for our next episode of ADALive!. We will be talking with Christy Dunaway about emergency services, what to do before, during and after. If you have questions about the Americans with Disabilities Act, contact your center at 1-800-949-4232. And remember all calls are free and they're confidential.

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