



The origins of rehabilitation for intellectual disabilities

When sifting through the archives of several female religious orders and a former psychiatric hospital in Quebec, historian **Professor Lucia Ferretti** unearthed a surprising finding on the creation and transformation of rehabilitation for people with intellectual disabilities. Below, she reveals more about her research on this topic

How did you become interested in studying the field of intellectual disabilities in the 20th Century?

In my specialism, socioreligious history, one of my aims is to gain an understanding of how the Catholic Church and its organisations influenced the type of welfare state that developed in Quebec in the 20th Century.

For my current project, I found that, between 1920 and 1975, most of the educational and psychosocial innovations that took place in Quebec were first explored in facilities owned by nuns. In the successive periods, these innovations then spread into the community. The role played by psychiatric hospitals in the history of rehabilitation for people with intellectual disabilities has not been widely known until today.

Why did you choose to study this field within Quebec?

The Canadian provinces have jurisdiction over education, vocational training, health,

social services and welfare, and all of these sectors are involved in intellectual disabilities management. The situation is therefore different in each province, and even more so in Quebec because of its French culture and Catholic legacy.

What is unique about Quebec's history on this topic?

Up to 1975, we found a dual European and American influence. Along with Montessori, Decroly and Piaget, nuns focused on developing intelligence; and alongside Doll and Hungerford, they aimed to equip young people with functional behaviour. After their hospitals closed during the move towards deinstitutionalisation, rehabilitation began to be restricted to developing people's social adaptation abilities. Moreover, while the English-speaking countries continued to favour long-term psychotherapy and support by medical and allied medical professions, Quebec developed a model of intervention by specialised educators, which is echoed in several European countries.

Under the influence of specialised educators, psychologists and social workers, Quebec abandoned the medical model of disability early on in the 1960s and adopted the social model. The medical model focuses on the individuals' impairments, whereas the social model sees disability as the result of the interaction of an individual with personal characteristics (medical or social) that make it difficult to overcome obstacles created by society.

Are you planning to expand upon this research in the future?

Yes. Not many historians are working on the history of intellectual disabilities. Families, professionals and, of course, the academic community all count on us! I am currently involved in preparing a web-based documentary, and also intend to disseminate all my findings in work that is both scholarly and accessible.



Psychiatric hospitals in Quebec: an unknown history

The role of psychiatric hospitals in rehabilitating people with intellectual disabilities in Quebec has predominantly been underappreciated – until now. New research from the **Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières**, Canada, highlights that this form of support was in fact started in Quebec's psychiatric hospitals

AFTER THE SECOND World War, against the backdrop of the rise of the welfare state, the field of intellectual disabilities underwent a gradual transformation. From being seen as a static condition that could be assessed by means of an IQ test, intellectual disabilities came to be seen as an evolving condition characterised not only by mental impairment in an individual, but also by impaired social adaptation, which was now partly attributed to society's demands.

Previously, 'mentally deficient' people had been viewed solely in terms of a lack of ability, almost to the extent of negating their status as human beings in some instances. However, in the 1950s and 60s, people started to recognise that these individuals had abilities and rights. 'Rehabilitation' began to be provided, but only for young people seen as capable of being 'educated'. It took place in boarding schools and was intended to be an intensive period of preparation for adult life in society.

Then, in the mid-1970s, a new approach to rehabilitation was developed; a set of measures

were designed to provide ongoing support for both adults and young people with intellectual disabilities, including severe disabilities, in their life in the community.

Most of the scholarly literature, dominated by excellent UK and American research, identified parents' associations and rehabilitation professionals as the main players in this paradigm shift. In fact, many of those involved on the ground, and even social science researchers, saw psychiatric hospitals as a symbol of the Dark Ages. Few have therefore been willing to consider the fact that some nuns ensured that the psychiatric hospitals they managed also took part in the modernisation of the intellectual disabilities field. Yet recent research conducted by Professor Lucia Ferretti, from Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières, has revealed that these facilities did in fact play a key role in advancing rehabilitation for intellectual disabilities.

FROM RELIGION TO REHABILITATION

In Quebec, rehabilitation activities for people with intellectual disabilities began in the 1920s

in Hôpital Saint-Jean-de-Dieu, Montreal, run by the Sisters of Providence. These nuns also founded the first teacher training college for special education in 1932 – and rehabilitation expertise spread from these institutions to the Montreal Catholic School Board.

Then in 1950, the same religious order established Mont-Providence, a rehabilitation school in a psychiatric setting, where professionals were afforded the opportunity to design educational programmes and psychosocial activities that were at the leading edge of the knowledge at that time.

When the school closed in 1954 – due to the refusal of both the federal and provincial governments to provide adequate funding – the professionals who had worked there persuaded the Government of Quebec to support an initial training programme for special education teachers within a state-run teacher training college. They also put their expertise to use in orphanages and the first psychosocial institutes, as well as on school boards in Montreal and other regions. Some of these

professionals went on to work at the Ministry of Education, where they transformed the way the state managed special education. They also started up a joint professional body, the Conseil du Québec de l'enfance exceptionnelle, which played a major role in the study of rehabilitation for people with intellectual disabilities in the 1960s.

INTRODUCING THE WELFARE STATE

But the largest experiment in rehabilitation within an institution was conducted from 1964 to 1975 in Hôpital Saint-Anne, Baie-Saint-Paul, run by the Catholic order the Little Franciscans of Mary sisters. At the same time, this establishment carried out the first mass transfer in Quebec of patients with intellectual disabilities out of long-stay hospitals. Sainte-Anne's was a clinical think tank on intellectual disabilities; it was here that a huge variety of programmes based on developmental approaches were created for patients of all ages and with all degrees of intellectual disabilities.

The hospital was also an incubator for community-based facilities, such as foster family placements, group homes, holiday camps for children with severe disabilities and sheltered workshops focusing on therapeutic rather than production activities. Sainte-Anne's also encouraged some of its staff members to undergo training in rehabilitation and they later moved on to new care facilities. It was also the main training venue in Quebec and fostered the spread of expert knowledge to school boards, schools, social service centres and job centres. It also equipped the Ministry of Social Affairs with skills for assessing rehabilitation programmes. By spearheading the move towards adapted support in the community, Sainte-Anne's therefore contributed to the introduction and spread of the social integration concept.

The Quebec Government of the 'Quiet Revolution' era became aware of these ideas of de-institutionalisation and normalisation, and was also preparing to implement the 'full state responsibility' solution which, even today, has never been put into practice elsewhere in Canada. Its support for Sainte-Anne's Hospital made the Government aware of the campaign by parents' associations to transfer the running of the small care facilities they themselves had set up to the State. Once freed up, in the 1970s, the Quebec parents' associations and their umbrella organisation started to become advocacy and support organisations for people with intellectual disabilities and their families.

CULTURAL INFLUENCES

In the 20th Century, societies with a traditionally Protestant culture were less tolerant towards people with intellectual disabilities than those with a traditionally Catholic culture. It was predominantly Protestant areas that voted in eugenics laws, which remained in force until the 1970s in some countries and Canadian provinces.

Race- and class-based judgments played a part in the way disabilities were viewed in the Protestant world, whereas this kind of judgment was found much less in Catholic circles. For example, the theory of degeneracy was not as widespread in Quebec as it was in the US or English-speaking Canada. Families were certainly ashamed, and the notion of sexual sin was present. However, nuns – even in the psychiatric hospitals that did not introduce rehabilitation activities – attempted to create some sort of decent living environment for the people in their care, despite shortcomings and an appalling lack of resources. The repressive, punishing attitude typical of institutions such as Orillia, in Ontario, was not present in Quebec – or at least not as an institutional philosophy. Catholicism is certainly a factor that must be taken into account to understand the different approach to intellectual disabilities found in Quebec compared with the rest of North America.

The professionals' frame of reference was also different: dialogue with the French professionals had been going on since the 1930s. In the 1950s, in addition to the frequent contact they had with the US, experts and other stakeholders in Quebec knew about initiatives that had been tried in Catholic European countries, through the network of international Catholic children's organisations. During that same period, professional and scholarly circles in English-speaking Canada were forging ties more often with English-speaking and Israeli colleagues.

Sitting at the confluence between two traditions, Quebec's history is rich and unique – and this is another reason why its experience is worthy of interest.

A REWINDING OF REHABILITATION PROGRESS?

Huge progress continued to be made after the 1980s. However, for the past 15 years or so the welfare state has been on the decline, genetics is becoming the preferred frame of reference for understanding intellectual disabilities, and society is promoting the highly liberal idea that all individuals are accountable for their own actions, even if they have a disability. As a result, services are being cut, intellectual disabilities are once again often being viewed as a case of individual bad luck and isolated people are being put away more frequently, either temporarily or permanently (and in prison rather than in psychiatric hospitals).

Based on the characteristically 20th Century notion that caring for vulnerable people is a collective community and state responsibility, it is important to question if the era of rehabilitation is now coming to a close.

REHABILITATION FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES: THE ROLE OF PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITALS IN QUEBEC BETWEEN 1920 AND 1975

OBJECTIVES

- To study the role played by psychiatric hospitals in developing and disseminating educational and psychosocial practices in the field of Intellectual disabilities in the 20th Century
- To find out how parents' associations changed from being managers of care facilities to advocacy organisations
- To examine the impact of culture on a society's approach to intellectual disabilities and people with an intellectual disability

FUNDING

Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada

CONTACT

Dr Lucia Ferretti

Full Professor, Social Sciences and Humanities Department

Bureau 1018-R
Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières
Trois-Rivières
Quebec, G9A 5H7
Canada

T +1 819 376 5011 x 3672

E lucia.ferretti@uqtr.ca

http://bit.ly/cieq_luciaferretti



LUCIA FERRETTI is a professor at the Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières and regular researcher of the Centre interuniversitaire d'études québécoises. She is particularly interested in the history of social services during the rise of the welfare state. Her recent work has focused on the history of rehabilitation for people with intellectual disabilities. In 2011, she received the prestigious Gérard Parizeau Prize.

UQTR



Université du Québec
à Trois-Rivières

ciéq

Centre
interuniversitaire
d'études québécoises