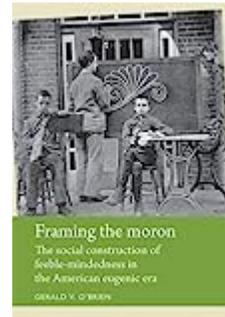


Gerald V. O'Brien. *Framing the Moron: The Social Construction of Feeble-Mindedness in the American Eugenic Era.* Disability History Series. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013. x + 203 pp. \$100.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7190-8709-7; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-78499-107-4.



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Exploring Metaphors of Marginalization

Framing the Moron: The Social Construction of Feeble-Mindedness in the American Eugenic Era is a comprehensive review of historical events that effectively demonstrate the application of metaphoric interpretation of otherness, which support eugenic social practices. The breadth of evidence presented is impressive. Gerald O'Brien gives significant primary and secondary support for each of the five metaphors articulated to conceptualize the moron. In addition, he explains in detail the variety of applications of eugenics. While much of this content centers specifically on the eugenic practices associated with Germany during Adolf Hitler's reign of power (1933-45), O'Brien makes clear that metaphoric constructions of marginalized groups, including those identified as morons, provided justification for eugenic practices applied worldwide.

O'Brien accurately and clearly describes the organism metaphor that focuses on construction of the individual as diseased, the animal metaphor that describes the individual as subhuman, the war and natural catastrophe metaphors that frame the individual as an en-

emy force, the religious metaphor that constructs the individual as immoral and sinful, the natural catastrophe metaphor in which society objectifies the individual in need of protection, and the object metaphor that constructs the moron as a poorly functioning human. In each chapter, the author provides a comprehensive definition of each metaphor. Each is followed by a substantial number of examples along with evidence of application of the metaphor to individuals within society across different historical eras. He includes a well-documented portrait of the systematic marginalization and mistreatment of societal groups that were deemed dangerous in some way or another to the welfare and nature of the social good. He makes clear that the articulation and application of laws and policies supporting eugenic practices reflect the influence of privileged and powerful groups within each historical period.

While the book offers a comprehensive inventory of evidence relative to eugenic and segregationist movements across time and societies, it presents only a limited focus on the group of individuals labeled "feeble-

minded. In his discussions at the end of each chapter, and particularly the focused discussion in the book's concluding chapter, it becomes clear that O'Brien has a solid understanding of the issues surrounding the social construction of "feeble-mindedness" and how the metaphors previously articulated in the text apply not only to that construction but also to societal responses to this population. It is in this last chapter that O'Brien gives the reader the first insight into the role of intelligence tests in the delineation of the hierarchy of cognitive ability that is central to any true discussion of the social construction of feeble-mindedness. It is also in this last chapter that he articulates a clear and detailed summary of the arguments specific to the eugenic response to "feeble-minded" individuals made across time, but particularly in the Progressive Era, from the 1890s to the 1920s. He discusses the "bureaucratic infrastructure" that supported segregationist and eugenic practices, which were justified through application of the metaphoric interpretations previously presented (p. 165). Finally, O'Brien analyzes more prevalent current responses to "feeble-mindedness" or to those with disabilities viewed through the metaphoric lens presented in the previous chapters. His evaluation of genetic research, prenatal testing, and subsequent abortive responses, as examples of contemporary eugenic practice, is informative and succinct.

The scholarly quality and comprehensive content of the book notwithstanding, *Framing the Moron* offers the reader only limited focus and specificity relative to the terms "social construction" and "feeble-mindedness." In the genre of disability study literature, the social construction of disability is generally understood to reflect the concepts explained by Gary L. Albrecht and Judith A. Levy. They contend "that disability definitions are not rationally determined but socially constructed. Despite the objective reality, what becomes a disability is determined by the social meanings individuals attach to particular physical and mental impairments. Certain disabilities become defined as social problems through the successful efforts of powerful groups to market their own self interests. Consequently the so-called 'objective' criteria of disability reflects the biases, self-interests, and moral evaluations of those in a position to influence policy." [1] While it seems clear that O'Brien is employing a similar articulation of social construction of disability in formulating his text, he fails to offer a clear understanding of the development of "feeble-mindedness" as a social construction. Nor does he make clear the connection between that construction and subsequent societal

responses. His decision to explore the role of metaphoric interpretation of the individual as evidence of "biases" or "moral evaluations" underlying responsive policies is a good one and is well supported by excellent and thorough scholarship, but the focus of the book is lost in the discussion of these metaphors and the attention given to eugenic responses, particularly during the Second World War.

O'Brien seems to have lost his focus during the creation of this work and, while the book is valuable, it does not offer what both the title and introduction promise. In the introduction, O'Brien states: "Over the past two decades, a rather large number of books focusing on the American eugenics movement have been published.... This begs the relevant question: why another book on eugenics? My response to this is that this book is not 'an eugenics' in the sense that this is another overview of the movement and its effects. Rather, the primary objective of this book is to describe the various ways in which those in the movement 'framed' the concept of feeble-mindedness or morosity in order to justify the development of social control policies that would adversely impact the basic rights of a vast group of individuals who had committed no crimes." Instead of offering the reader the content promised as the primary objective of the text, O'Brien presents a more generalized examination of the justification of eugenic practices, with a heavy focus on those carried out in Nazi Germany. It is not until his final chapter that he includes a detailed discussion of social control as it relates to the "framing [of] the concept of feeble-mindedness" (p. 1).

Framing the Moron is a scholarly articulation of the metaphors applied in the diminution of worth of whole groups of individuals in society that supported subsequent social control policies, including forced sterilization, incarceration, and even death. O'Brien's work is a wonderful and important historiography of the evolution and implementation of such policies and the construction of a kind of "group-think" that undermines redress or wide-scale social outrage. Though the book fails to strictly align with the assumption of content given in the title, and with the author's claims in the introduction, the text is thoughtfully composed and makes an important contribution to disability studies literature.

Note

[1]. Gary L. Albrecht and Judith A. Levy, "Constructing Disabilities as Social Problems," in *Cross National Rehabilitation Policies: A Sociological Perspective*, ed. Gary L. Albrecht (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1981), 14.

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