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## **The subject of intellectual disability**

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## The subject of intellectual disability: A reply to Clegg, Murphy and Almack Murray K. Simpson

As a starting point, Clegg, Murphy and Almack (2017) contend that frameworks of policy fail both to engage with ethical theory and to fit with the complex realities of how services are delivered. Both of these points are well supported both in their engagement with literature and in the research presented. Their Deleuzoguattarian analysis and Deleuzean ethical alternatives provide fresh and challenging insights. The key question in this rejoinder is whether their critique goes too far, or not far enough.

To begin, however, it is worth making a comment on terminology. Clegg et al begin with a passing comment to the effect that 'intellectual disability' was 'formerly learning disability in the UK and mental retardation in the US' (p.5). Whilst this is clearly a gloss on an issue that may not be central to the paper, to overlook changes in terminology can miss important other conceptual and political shifts. One of the most important aspects of 'ID' is that it marks a coming together of the academic field for the first time since the beginning of the twentieth century. In the UK the highly contested shift to 'learning difficulties' in the 1980s, and, to a lesser extent, 'learning disability', was marked by the fact that it was the first time that people to whom that term was applied were active in promoting it.

By uncritically shifting to ID and appearing to assume that it refers to the same thing, the opportunity to keep terminology available as a political weapon for those caught in its net is unfortunate. Secondly, however, it cannot be regarded as a new signifier for the same concept since 'learning' is an activity, a practice, whilst 'intellectual' returns the signifier to what is assumed to be *inside* either the brain or mind. If the shift in *academic* terminology to ID does take place, and there are certainly good arguments for it, then we ought not to take this as unproblematic and neither should we anticipate that there must be a corresponding shift at the policy and service level.

The central premise of Clegg et al's paper is the 'slippery' nature of choice for people with ID and its general promotion without attention to varying levels of capacity. However, herein also lies the key problem of the paper. Choice is regarded as less than straightforward for people with ID because of their reduced capacity for making 'informed' choices. Central to this critique lies the troublesome figure of the liberal subject and the failure of people with ID to fit its strictures – by definition, it has been argued (Simpson, 2014). The authors' position here evinces a number of problems.

The first issue arises from a failure fully to follow through the critique of the liberal subject. Following Reinders (2000), the authors identify liberalism's emphasis on autonomous human agency as intrinsically problematic for people with ID. People with ID, it is argued, lack the necessary capacity for the kind of rational self-determination assumed and required in a consumer society, albeit to varying degrees. However, the paper repeatedly invokes

choice and the assertion that people with ID have an impaired ability to practice it, and, in doing so, fails to kill off the modern subject, as Deleuze and Guattari (1984, 1987) attempt to do. Instead, the modern subject is constantly deployed as the silent standard against which people with ID have pathological subjectivity. Hence, the spectre of the liberal subject still haunts the paper as the putative norm for those who do have full mental capacity and from which deviance is determined. This is evident in the assumption that the ideology of choice does bear a close relationship to how choices are generally made, and that choice is the fundamental driver in human behaviour – so, for example, the questioning of whether certain choices can be regarded as ‘reasonable’ makes implicit recourse to an assumed measure of reasonableness. Žižek highlights the condition of the modern subject:

[B]eing compelled to make decisions in a situation which remains opaque is our basic condition. We know the standard situation of the forced choice in which I am free to choose on condition that I make the right choice, so that the only thing left for me to do is make the empty gesture of pretending to accomplish freely what expert knowledge has imposed upon me. (Žižek, 2009, p.63)

Similarly, Deleuze and Guattari leave no ground available for the unified, autonomous subject at all (eg 1984). In other words, it is not simply people with ID’s failure to be liberal subjects that is the problem, it is the specific challenge that some people pose to the ideological myth of sovereign autonomy that leads to them being enmeshed in the ‘apparatus’ (Agamben, 2009) of ID (Simpson, 2014). Even the historically constituted basis of ‘intelligence’ or ‘capacity’ (Goodey, 2011) is not acknowledged.

This leads to a second, related, issue, this time relating to the connection between choice and identity. Building further on Deleuze and Guattari, Clegg et al assert, ‘focus on choice controls the way that identity can be expressed’ (p.7). Notwithstanding the fact escaping systems of control is never an option (Deleuze, 1993), the concept of ‘identity’ must be historicised. The, apparently contradictory, idea of an *individual* having ‘identity’, which obviously implies ‘sameness’, is early modern. In one of the earliest formulations of the idea of *individual* identity, Locke (1690/1961) defines it as those aspects of subjectivity that are consistent for a person over time. Hence:

to find wherein *personal identity* consists, we must consider what *person* stands for;—which, I think, is a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places; which it does only by that consciousness which is inseparable from thinking... (Locke, 1961, II. xxvii., 9, p. 280)

Therefore, choice, identity and the modern subject are indivisible, making it tautological to suggest that choice controls identity. Additionally, ‘identity’, as subject-consistency, is radically incompatible with the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari.

Thirdly, in the case studies, ‘choice’ becomes a frame that the researchers repeatedly impose upon responses. Whilst this may well reflect the presentation of the data, the word ‘choice’ crops up in only one interview extract, and then it refers to the choice of a parent. All other mentions of choice in relation to the interview results appear to be interpretations

of what was said. 'Choice' thus functions as the filter from the data *into* the analysis – defining certain statements as 'choice' – as well as providing the analytical framework itself. The paper thus finds what it has already placed.

However, given the authors' objective of introducing Deleuzian ethics, the problematic analysis of 'choice' and the liberal subject may be inconsequential. In the proposed shift away from rule-based 'morality', which shapes the capitalist consumer – rational, autonomous, self-interested and individual – Clegg et al argue for the adoption of 'relational', 'practical' ethics that result in 'joyful', 'affirmative' living, that 'reach beyond rather than challenge liberal values' (p.8). However, the detachment from history and structure leaves Deleuzian ethics, at least on this account, silent on gender, class, race and other lines of oppression, at a structural level. Even though gender, for instance, is a clear issue in caring, and threads itself throughout the authors' data, it is never explicitly discussed or theorised other than in the caring relationship. Similarly, the socio-economic class of the three families is cited, but not explored as an ethical issue. Paradoxically, the proposed Deleuzian approach, reduces ethics purely to a level of how individuals interact. There is no apparent interest in or point of leverage for structural, cultural, economic or political change. It is on precisely such points that resurgent continental Marxism, e.g. Slavoj Žižek (2004) and Alain Badiou (2004), assert their critique of Deleuze, Guattari and others. Playing into these critiques, rather than a 'going beyond', the authors appear to abandon 'rights, distributive justice or the law' (Braidotti 2012, cited in Clegg et al, 2017, p. 8), which are given no positive place in the ethical scheme. So, whilst they identify the principal 'defences' and 'critiques' of liberalism, it is not clear whether they have any sympathy for either. Certainly, no argument is made for fundamental social change, but, at the same time, implicit hostility to liberalism seems to run throughout.

Whilst Clegg et al's paper is undoubtedly important and challenging, the Deleuzoguattarian reading of choice and ID does not always go sufficiently far. The authors' critical emphasis seemed placed only on those concepts which they wished to problematize, even though the same points needed to be made throughout. It is not only 'choice' which is 'slippery', the very concept of 'transition' becomes problematic when subject to a Deleuzian reading. 'Transition' suggests something relatively discrete, a movement or process from A to B. For Deleuze, of course, we are always and already in a state of 'becoming'.

Notwithstanding the centrality of 'choice' to the paper, it also remains frustratingly untheorised throughout. The fact that it is presented as a relatively straightforward and self-evident concept or practice, highlights both the dependency of the paper on the silent liberal subject and overly simplistic assumptions about how choices are made generally. Beyond the implication that choice should be over-ridden for people with profound ID where it is in their best interests, a more consistent position is perhaps available. Curiously absent from the Deleuzian critique of choice is any discussion of 'desire', though it is central to Deleuzian ethics. There are only three references to 'desire' in the paper, none of these are particularly Deleuzian sense. As Shildrick (2009) notes:

Desire is not an element of any singular subject; it is not pre-given; it is neither possessed nor controlled; it represents nothing; and nor does it flow directly from

one individual to another. Instead it comes into being through... 'desiring machines', assemblages that cannot be said to exist outside of their linkages and interconnections, and which may encompass both the animate and inanimate, the organic and the inorganic. (Shildrick, 2009, p. 135)

The introduction of desire allows for the liberal concept of 'choice' to be taken entirely out of the equation for all. Not only do ethics become relational, but all lines of separation, domination and categorisations, including ID, become ethically unsustainable. For this reason, then, the authors' ambitions must be judged incomplete. If Deleuzian ethics are indeed radical, then a more thoroughgoing approach is needed, if not, the objections of critics that they are an ideological cover for neoliberalism must be addressed.

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