Why is there learning disabilities? A critical analysis of the birth of the field in its social context

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Abstract

This chapter presents an interpretation of why the category of learning disabilities emerged, that differs from interpretations that currently prevail. It argues that the category was created in response to social conditions during the late 1950s and early 1960s which brought about changes in schools that were detrimental to children whose achievement was relatively low. The category was created by white middle class parents in an effort to differentiate their children from low-achieving low-income and minority children. The category offered their children a degree of protection from probable consequences of low achievement because it upheld their intellectual normalcy and the normalcy of their home backgrounds, and it suggested hope for a cure and for their ability eventually to attain higher status occupations than other low achievers.

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Social science accepted the task of social philosophy by focussing on how society should work. But, instead of focussing on moral questions, social science has tried to provide theoretical tools for social actors to engage in a practical analysis of their situations and thus, arrive at what their options were in different social, political, and economic situations. An outside force, such as a government, can enforce order and privilege itself or its most favored groups. I pose that the idea that strategic action occurs in fields requires the notion of social skill, defined as the ability of actors to induce cooperation in other actors in order to produce, contest, or reproduce a given set of rules (Fligstein, 1997; Fligstein and McAdam, 1994; Joas, 1996).