

## Don't Be Surprised

Jack Yates  
May 14, 2010

I am a member of an Internet "list-serve," which is a group of perhaps a few hundred people who can write e-mails to the whole list on topics raised by any of the members. This list is hosted by people at the Center on Human Policy at Syracuse University, and its members are (roughly speaking) progressive on the issues of services and people's lives which arise. I have only written contributions four or five times in the five years I have been a member, and most entries others write are short and informal. In April 2010 there was a two-day flurry of entries on the topic of a logo for intellectual impairment (intellectual disability, or mental retardation), which I joined.

Berthy De La Rosa Aponte from New Mexico began the exchange by asking members if they could help her with suggestions for a logo, a symbol for intellectual impairment. She wrote, "I am surprised to learn that we do not have a symbol that represents intellectual or developmental disability." She said her organization was celebrating the anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act, and she wanted to offer the symbol for the anniversary's logo. She included a copy of an existing logo from the New Mexico Governor's Commission on Disability, which showed four symbols, each one representing a different disability. The symbol for physical disability was an abstract human figure in a wheelchair; the symbol for deafness was the same human figure using sign language; the symbol for blindness was the same human figure using a cane; and the symbol for intellectual disability was the same human figure shown in a hollow outline, rather than filled-in as it was drawn for the other three symbols.

David Wetherow from British Columbia responded by writing, "Remarkable! An empty person!" Others, too, objected to the symbol for people with intellectual impairment in the New Mexico logo. Judith Laufer of Texas sent out the logo of a self-advocacy organization which was "intended to be age-ethnicity-ability inclusive," and which was composed of five markedly triangular cubist-style faces, one of which was on a body in a wheelchair. Nancy Weiss of Delaware responded by noting that "whenever one tries to use people-like figures, you're going to exclude or insult someone.... I think you're safer with a logo that depicts the energy or direction of a project." The example she included looks much like the Nike Corporation's "swoosh" symbol.

Hank Bersani from Oregon posted the logo for the Korea Institute on Special Education. Its four symbols were similar to the New Mexico logo described above. The symbol for physical impairment was a stick figure in a wheelchair; the symbol for hearing impairment was a hand using sign language; the symbol for visual impairment was a hand scanning Braille text; and the symbol for intellectual impairment was a face half black and half white. Puzzling.

After various members objected to the Korean logo, Richard Jacobs from California agreed with Nancy Weiss that “I don’t see why a logo has to be representational, “ and added that “I’m not even sure why a one-time or occasional event like ADA recognition even needs a logo.” Martin Elks from Pennsylvania put it more vehemently: “I would avoid a logo of intellectual disability like the plague.” Graduates of Dr. Wolfensberger’s workshop on the history of human services (Martin is one) will hear the echoes in that characterization.

My own response, written more formally and at some length, more like an essay than like a “chat” was as follows:

Richard’s assertions seem to me to be true: a one-time event gains little or nothing by having a logo (which is a tool of “branding” working by repetition over time), and a logo to be effective (either as branding or just aesthetically) need not be representational. And the earlier point by Nancy and others, that a logo representing people will almost always be problematical, is surely true. But Berthy’s last point, that symbols convey a message universally, is important, too --- universally, powerfully, and often unconsciously. So we do need to pay attention to such symbols, I believe.

One point missing from this discussion thus far, very understandably, is more particular to the issue of intellectual impairment, rather than logos in general or logos about people in general. The logos representing blind people, deaf people, people who use wheelchairs--- these represent a group of people by the concrete, material, picturable, recognizable means those people may use to **adapt** to their impairment. One can draw hands signing, wheelchairs rolling (preferably in an upward direction), a white cane, a page of Braille text. Those adaptations or supports are, in themselves, positive things, even though they compensate for a deficit of some sort. But there is no analogous concrete, picturable adaptation for intellectual impairment. How could there be--- it is not a physical, material impairment but an impairment of mind.

Note that the recognizable logos for groups of people are representations of adaptations, **not** representations of the impairment itself. Picturing the impairment itself would be negative--- inevitably, because the impairment is inherently a deficit. There will be no perfect (nor perhaps even satisfactory) solution to the question of how to represent an inherently negative reality in an enhancing way. Of course, I do not mean that the **person** is in any way negative, or less worthy than others. But the impairment **in itself** is a negative reality, a deficit, a lack of something which is otherwise taken for granted. Further, it is the impairment which is the **defining shared characteristic** meant to be conveyed the symbols this discussion is evaluating. The people themselves, of course, are more than their impairment. Their impairment is not their most important characteristic. But impairment **is** the characteristic which

differentiates (as a group) the group about which we are puzzling how to represent symbolically.

This is also the ultimately insurmountable difficulty in trying to come up with an enhancing phrase to describe this group--- there is no perfect solution, because the reality of the shared characteristic is inherently not enhancing. As we have experienced with the changes in accepted terminology over the past several decades, the inherently negative reality catches up quickly with the newly-coined group names.

So it should not surprise us at all: there is no international symbol for people with intellectual impairments. And it would not be surprising that, if there were one, we would not be satisfied with it at all. Seeking to choose or design such a symbol would be a treadmill: lots of work, getting us nowhere. It might make more sense, in the rare instances when a logo or symbol is worth having, to try to represent symbolically the key principles or ideals which guide our work (e.g., full community membership for all) rather than the people for whom those principles and ideals have become our life's work.