

## Supporting Persons With Intellectual and Developmental Disability: Will Our Emerging Political Leaders Build on President Kennedy's Legacy?

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While identifying initial themes in preparing a narrative analysis on President John F. Kennedy's (JFK's) speeches on developmental disabilities, it struck me that in the 4 intervening decades since, our presidents and presidential candidates have stated little about their personal experiences concerning family members with a disability. Certainly, several members of Congress have demonstrated their solid and consistent advocacy for policies and programs (e.g., Senators Tom Harkin [IA, D], James Jeffords [VT, Ind.], Charles Grassley [IA, R] and Ted Kennedy [MA, D]); however, those seeking the highest office have stated little. When deconstructing three JFK speeches (Kennedy, 1962, 1963a, 1963b) and a 1994 interview conducted with Eunice Kennedy Shriver, I found that several initial themes emerged, including the following: (a) We as a wealthy nation can do better. (b) This is an international challenge: Why are the rates of mental retardation lower in Scandinavia than in the United States? and (c) There is a need for furthering the interconnected role of science, society, and the environment.

Despite the current sound bites and the presidential candidates' staff members' responses in the popular media to structured questionnaires concerning their stances on services and initiatives for persons with disabilities, these responses tell us little about their passion for the subject. Although we may search their responses to assure they use non-stigmatizing or "people-first" language, their words often appear vacuous. Although the rhetoric of politicians has a place in narrative analysis and can inform the electorate (Graham, 1993; Tierney, 2000); what are the true perspectives of the current and emerging political leaders towards disability? President Kennedy used a variety of individuals with expert knowledge and diverse perspectives and heuristics in order to address the needs of persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Although not realizing the consistency of this ap-

proach with the more current exploratory scientific approach of complexity (Page, 2007) vis-a-vis the application of diversity and cooperation, he set standards and expectations of what disability advocates should strive toward in the larger context of the American experiment.

Framed as an international challenge, influential people in the 1960s demanded that the United States become the international leader in the disability field; JFK compared our rates to those of Scandinavian countries (e.g., those countries had better pre- and postnatal services). An initial scan of the speeches reveals several themes, the most prominent being that given our wealth, it is our responsibility as a country to do better. These themes reflect the desire for an interconnectedness between families who had a child with a disability to a greater society interested and committed to supporting and correcting the wrongs done to this segment of not only the American people but to take these steps forward and be global leaders.

Given the eloquence of these references in JFK's speeches, one initially assumes that his noted speechwriter Ted Sorenson composed these words. Surprisingly, however, in a 1994 interview (Guggenheim, 1999), Eunice Kennedy Shriver stated that neither she nor Sorenson wrote these references to persons with mental retardation. This further enhances the commitment from a personal level of one leader's attempts to forward the movement. Despite the first President Bush's valiant efforts in enacting the Americans With Disabilities Act (1990) that strived further toward making persons with disabilities fully included citizens, little progress has since been made. Kennedy's approach was successful because it was not solely a top-down approach; it encouraged activism from the grass roots.

As a social work researcher focusing on complexity theory, I am intrigued further by the elegance of JFK's approach within an emergent frame-

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work. Although there was no research paradigm in the 1960s, he and his supporters considered initial conditions of persons with disabilities and the overall situation and of these individuals and their families. This attention provided an attraction for those interested in the movement by first defining common and attainable goals, reducing the incidence of intellectual and developmental disability, and becoming international leaders. Through JFK's legacy, a system was created that enabled others to provide feedback in developing a procedure to inform parents and researchers by implementing a science-to-service approach. This system further led to self-organizing and an emergent behavior in the form of disability services and the accelerated closure of institutions and shift to community-based services. Based on these strides, what are the next steps for the new leadership? Will it include increased federal assistance for supported employment, self-determination, and micro-enterprises? Are there new initiatives to encourage and assure the full participation and citizenship of persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities? Certainly, from the available media, the candidates have stated little.

Applying Axinn and Stern's (2005) four assumptions to the formulation of social policies and programs (level of output, view of society itself, view of human nature, and historical heritage), my goal was to contribute to understanding the movement's emergence. Granted, the United States entered the 1960s in an extremely healthy economic position, with our balance of trade and level of output high. We cannot allow the current deteriorating economic standards 45 years later to become an excuse for not striving forward. In the view of human nature though, we still see the impact of the Great Depression and the resulting New Deal of Franklin Delano Roosevelt to address the emergence of the *deserving poor*, namely, those persons who were different from individuals who were undeserving because of idleness or lack of moral character. In this scenario, people were poor because of a deficiency of economic opportunity and the presence of persistent and systemic barriers in their surrounding systems. Similarly, President Kennedy identified this disenfranchised community of persons with mental retardation living in institutions as deserving more from our society given the systemic and persistent barriers impeding their opportunity toward becoming participating citizens. His plans committed the surrounding health, education, and social service systems to support these individuals and their fam-

ilies. Although America's individualism, not egalitarianism, prominently reflect our historical heritage, for this brief moment we saw the benefits of this collective effort.

Social innovations, within both the public and private sectors, reflect broad and deep attempts to address the complex issues related to disability. These social innovations (Westley, Zimmerman, & Patton, 2006) can occur in several situations and self-organize from a grass roots level. Social change most often happens incrementally in the United States. On rare occasion when conditions allow for a significant change, as occurred in the Kennedy years, we must embrace these changes and question who will take the disability rights movement to the next stage. Therefore, in the end, we should ask our emerging political leaders how persons with disabilities affected them personally, given that it is highly unlikely that they do not have an immediate or extended family member or other person close to them who has an intellectual or developmental disability; most likely, the leaders have a story to tell.

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