Recovering the hidden histories of people with learning disabilities from Black and minoritised ethnic communities

Faculty of Wellbeing Education and Language Studies (WELS)

Call for doctoral projects starting in October 2027

The Open University

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Project description

Project Type

This is a PhD project

Please note that a research proposal aligned with this research project will be required from applicants in addition to an application form.

School

Health, Wellbeing and Social Care

Members

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Aim

The principal aim of the project is to develop new knowledges at the intersection of learning disability and Black British history. More specifically the PhD project will research the lives and experiences of people of colour with

learning disabilities who were admitted to the UK's learning disability long-stay hospitals between approximately 1960-2000, a significantly under-researched aspect of British social history. Critical to this project will be identifying people with learning disabilities and family members who are able to provide first person accounts of institutional life.

Utilising a mixed method approach the project will aim to explore: a) the backgrounds of people from Black and minoritised ethnic communities who became residents in former learning disability institutions; b) the conditions and trajectories that resulted in institutional admission; c) people's experiences living in these institutions (and/or supporting family members who resided in them); and d) experiences of institutional discharge. The project will consider how these institutional histories relate to the contemporary experiences (and stark health and social inequalities) facing people of colour with learning disabilities today. This project builds upon a programme of work initiated by activist historian and member of the Centre for Society, History and Learning Disabilities (SHLD), Paul Christian.

Methodology

The project will require a mixed methods approach which is likely to include:

- Participatory methodology
- Archival research
- Oral history / life story research
- Creative methods to facilitate remembering and to enable people who may not use words to communicate to participate in the research.

It will be conducted inclusively, with key input from disabled activist Paul Christian, a member of the Centre for Society, History and Learning Disabilities (SHLD), who has been the key driver for this programme of work.

This proposed doctoral project grapples with several methodological and ethical challenges. Recruitment is likely to be complicated by poor or missing records from the institutions, and variable/inconsistent recording of ethnicity at the time of people's institutional admission and discharge. Many of the participants and their families who had experience of the UK's learning disability institutions will be ageing, and some will have died. OU pilot data suggests that some individuals lost contact with their families following admission to institutions. Thus, for both the archival research and the gathering of oral history testimonies, great care will be required to identify and approach relevant participants; ethical responsibility will be critical. The successful candidate will be supported in these endeavours by an experienced supervisory team, alongside the wider Centre for Society, History and Learning Disabilities network (which includes historians, archivists, practitioners, self-advocates, community organisations and health and social care providers).

This project is situated at the intersection of disability studies, disability history, Black British history, and social policy. We welcome applications from candidates with expertise in one of more of these areas, while recognising that few people are likely to have experience and expertise across all areas as this is an emerging field of study. We will support the successful applicant to enhance their experience in areas that may be new to them, developing their skills and knowledge as an inter-disciplinary researcher.

Contribution

The PhD study will build upon a completed Open University/SHLD scoping review and pilot research project to address a significant gap in the history of learning disability, the history of Black British history and the relationship between history and current policy and practice.


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