Oral History Society

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Source: *Oral History*, Vol. 47, No. 1, PARENTING (SPRING 2019), pp. 92-104
Published by: Oral History Society
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/45214452
Accessed: 24-02-2021 09:15 UTC

Worried mothers? Gender, class and the origins of the 'dyslexia myth'

by Philip Kirby

Abstract: The 'dyslexia debate' continues to attract attention. Recent years have seen a spike in critics claiming that dyslexia is no more than a myth. Such views have received widespread coverage in the media and elsewhere, and been met with a series of counter-arguments by the dyslexia community. Missing from the debate, however, is a historical perspective. In this article, the origins of the modern dyslexia movement are explored, casting light on three key tenets of the dyslexia myth: dyslexia's putative connection with 'worried mothers', the middle-classes and dubious science. Through a series of oral histories, the article reveals how these critiques can be understood as the product of a particular gendered history.

Keywords: dyslexia, dyslexia debate, gender, women, literacy

In recent years, debates around the 'dyslexia myth' have been resurgent. In 2005, a Channel 4 television documentary, *The Myth of Dyslexia*, caused consternation amongst many with dyslexia, as well as those teaching, researching and campaigning around the condition, by highlighting perceived inconsistences in dyslexia's definition.[1] Four years later, Graham Stringer MP described dyslexia as a 'cruel fiction', which deserved consignment to the 'dustbin of history'.[2] In 2014, these popular denunciations were consolidated with the publication of *The Dyslexia Debate*, which examined usage of the term and queried its efficacy as a diagnosis.[3] Following the book's publication, several newspaper columnists argued that dyslexia was an excuse for overly concerned middle-class parents, based on suspect science.[4] In Rod Liddle's words, writing in the *Spectator*: 'For decades now dyslexia has been the crutch upon which middle-class parents support themselves when they discover that their children are actually dense [...] contrary to their expectations'.[5] As this quote implies, such accusations have dogged dyslexia for some time.

Current iterations of these critiques have been met with widespread criticism by researchers working in the science of reading.[6] They also stand against broadly-accepted definitions of dyslexia, most notably that of the 2009 Rose report, *Identifying and Teaching Children and Young People with Dyslexia and Literacy Difficulties*. In that review, based on nearly 900 submissions of evidence, dyslexia is described as:

> A learning difficulty that primarily affects skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling. Characteristic features of dyslexia are difficulties in phonological awareness, verbal memory and verbal processing speed. Dyslexia occurs across the range of intellectual abilities.[7]

This paper, however, is not about dyslexia's contemporary science – other than to note that there is substantial evidence of the condition's existence – but rather the ahistoricism of much of the dyslexia debate, and what a historical perspective might contribute to this. In particular, it shows how many of the recent accusations directed toward dyslexia are entwined with the prominent role of women in dyslexia's history.

The modern history of dyslexia begins in the 1960s.[8] In 1963, the Word Blind Centre for Dyslexic Children (WBC) was created: the first centre in the country dedicated to the diagnosis and treatment of children with the condition.[9] The WBC closed in 1972, but provided the inspiration for several later organisations, including the British Dyslexia Association (BDA), the Dyslexia Institute, the Helen Arkell Dyslexia Centre and the Hornsby International Dyslexia Centre, amongst others. Elsewhere, a number of specialist schools were founded to assist children with dyslexia; and researchers in London, Bangor and Birmingham, many of whom had been involved with the WBC, advanced psychological understanding of the condition. Their work set the groundwork for ultimate government recognition in the late 1980s.[10] The majority of these organisations were founded/led by women, including the WBC, BDA, the Dyslexia Institute, the Helen Arkell and Hornsby Centres: in dyslexia advocacy, teaching and research, women were key to dyslexia's rise to prominence.

Given this central role, many of the main critiques of dyslexia have been couched in gendered terms. Through alleged 'over-parenting', it has often been 'worried mothers' who have been suspected by educational experts of manufacturing dyslexia in order to explain their children's learning difficulties.[11] Ironically, their concern has also contributed to other aspects of the modern dyslexia myth, as highlighted by Liddle's quote: that dyslexia is a middle-class explanation for poor academic performance, based on a contestable evidence base. As this paper will go on to explore, the women most able to form the associations, schools and other organisations mentioned above were, necessarily, those most able to mobilise the requisite social and financial capital – in other words, they were middle-class. Because of gendered economic and social roles, much of this work was undertaken by them for little or no remuneration, with husbands as domestic breadwinners. In research, where women again were prominent, the intersection with emotional support has arguably contributed to dyslexia research being considered a 'soft science', as the paper will explore.

In having women of means at the forefront, the history of dyslexia has paralleled that of other learning difficulties, particularly autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).[12] In both these movements, women have faced criticism from educational officials and others, similar to that directed at those campaigning for dyslexia's recognition.[13] From the 1920s onward in the UK, Mitzi Waltz has charted how 'mother-blaming' was used by state schools, child guidance clinics and juvenile courts, amongst other institutions, to explain autistic children's 'inadequate' development, especially educational.[14] In the US in the 1960s, Steve Silberman has shown how medical officials coined the term 'overanxious mothers' for the same purpose.[15] During the same period, in the case of ADHD, Matthew Smith has traced how educational experts read mothers' concerns as contributory to, rather than revealing of, the problems faced by their children.[16] Reluctance to recognise these conditions, therefore, has been predicated on a broader history of concerned parents, usually mothers, running up against a sceptical and often masculine educational, political and scientific establishment.

Outside these specific campaigns, the dyslexia movement might also be situated with the rise of a host of British voluntary organisations seeking to help patients from the 1960s onward.[17] Of these, some focused on particular conditions; others, such as the Patients Association (1963-present), worked to assist individuals regardless of specific diagnosis.[18] In dialogue and often dispute with governments, such groups advocated for the 'voice and choice' of consumers within the context of rapidly expanding welfare bureaucracies – of healthcare, but also education.[19] Again, the role of women was often crucial. The Patients Association was founded by a teacher, Helen Hodgson, concerned at reports of testing on patients without their consent and by the Thalidomide scandal, amongst other issues.[20] Her work built on other more specific women-led campaigns for greater consumer involvement in healthcare from the late 1950s onward, including the rights of mothers to visit their children in hospital.[21]

While this paper's focus is on women in dyslexia's history, this is not to disavow the role of men in achieving recognition for the condition – as the paper will show, many have contributed to the dyslexia movement since its earliest days. Rather, it is to draw attention to the pre-eminent role of women in dyslexia's history – a focus also necessary in explaining how the 'dyslexia myth' has been feminised in a series of ways, and charting a history that has previously gone unrecorded (see below). As the paper will go on to explore, the campaign for the recognition of dyslexia has often been one characterised by (mainly) female campaigners up against intransigent (mainly) male policymakers and civil servants. But within this divide, there are fractures – some of the earliest research on dyslexia was undertaken by male scientists; reticence to engage with dyslexia has come from female, as well as male, policymakers. As with any analytical frame, a feminist approach cannot capture the entirety of dyslexia's history, but it enables an understanding of its key events.

Methods and approach

This paper is based on a series of oral histories which form a key collection within the UK Dyslexia Archive, currently being compiled at St John's College, Oxford. The archive was founded in 2016, and holds the records of the main dyslexia organisations in Britain from the 1960s onward, including the Word Blind Centre and the Hornsby International Dyslexia Centre. In addition, it houses an expanding collection of interviews, conducted with key policymakers, advocates, researchers and teachers in the history of dyslexia, selected on the basis of expert opinion in the field.[22] Of these, the majority have been undertaken with women, reflecting the breadth and depth of women's contribution to dyslexia's history, and their role as the founders and leaders of the major dyslexia organisations. Through these, the voices of those who have been key in achieving support and political recognition for children with dyslexia in Britain, a generation that is now passing, are being recorded.

Oral history is well suited to approaching this topic for several reasons. First, well-documented oral history enables the capture of the recollections of those who, for a variety of reasons, fall outside official histories.[23] While many of the women here are elites across several metrics, most obviously socio-economic background, their voices have largely gone unrecorded. Many (but not all) of the men featured in this paper have rightly had their achievements previously chronicled – in books, articles, lectures and so forth. The same is not true of the women, often because their roles have been informal, unofficial and *ad hoc*. Second, as a methodological approach, oral history suits the nature of dyslexia. For those women here who are dyslexic themselves, greater comfort with oral rather than alphabetic literacy has not necessarily predisposed them to write down their histories; thus oral history has been crucial in recording their stories. Much of dyslexia's history, including teaching, advocacy and general awareness-raising, has been dependent on spoken rather than written communication.

In structure, this paper considers the origins of three central tenets of the dyslexia myth: first, that dyslexia was invented by 'worried mothers', overly-concerned with the educational performance of either their own children or children under their care; second, the role of gender in denunciations, especially by government, of dyslexia as a 'middle-class myth' and the reasons why the middle classes expressed an interest in dyslexia when and how they did; and third, that the concept of dyslexia is based on suspect science, often conducted by women with an emotional commitment to children with dyslexia, and purportedly 'soft' as a result. The paper concludes by reiterating the importance of historical perspectives on learning difficulties, showing how contemporary discourses around the condition are predicated on a gendered history that has hitherto gone unexplored.

'Worried mothers': women and the beginning of the dyslexia movement (1962-1972)

In 1962, Sandhya Naidoo waited anxiously before a job interview. The post was for educational psychologist, the employer a new organisation, the Word Blind Centre for Dyslexic Children, based in Bloomsbury, London. Formed by a committee of interested parties who came together at a conference on the topic months before, the centre was the first in the country dedicated to the assessment and treatment of children with word blindness or, as it was increasingly becoming known, dyslexia.[24] 'I watched and there was this trim, business-like woman getting out of a taxi. I thought: my God, if she's applying, I don't stand a chance!'[25] In fact, Naidoo did stand a chance, and the woman, Mia Kellmer Pringle, was a psychologist who already sat on the Word Blind Committee, alongside Alfred White Franklin, Macdonald Critchley, Maisie Holt, Patrick Meredith and Oliver Zangwill.[26] All were either psychologists or neurologists who had encountered children with this particular difficulty during their work. Naidoo went on to become the centre's director, serving successfully until its closure in 1972.

At the time of the centre's opening, dyslexia was little known. Brief references to similar symptoms in the early twentieth century had been incorrectly attributed to ocular deficit, leading to the misnomer 'word blindness', the legacy of which was present in the WBC's name.[27] Ironically, it was research conducted at the WBC that would come to disprove these claims. In 1970, shortly before the centre's closing, Naidoo published *Specific Dyslexia: The Research Report of the ICAA Word Blind Centre for Dyslexic Children*.[28] There, she stressed dyslexia as a developmental learning disorder, and made the first systematic comparison of children with and without dyslexia, which would go on to influence a series of later researchers. For Maggie Snowling, a leading contemporary researcher on dyslexia, 'that book was the book that was most illuminating at the time, because it described cases in detail. I was really inspired by that'.[29] With Macdonald Critchley's *The Dyslexic Child*, published the same year, a research base began to emerge for dyslexia as a clear, diagnosable learning difficulty.[30]

The WBC would also provide the inspiration for a series of further dyslexia organisations. 1971 saw the opening of the Helen Arkell Dyslexia Centre and the Barts Dyslexia Clinic, under the stewardship of Bevé Hornsby, a speech and language therapist, psychologist and educator. They were joined in 1972 by the British Dyslexia Association, formed under the auspices of Marion Welchman, a nurse; and the Dyslexia Institute, created by Kathleen Hickey and Wendy Fisher, a special needs teacher and home worker, respectively. In 1973, the Language Development Unit opened at Aston University under Margaret Newton, a psychologist; and the Bangor Dyslexia Unit at the University College of North Wales was formalised in 1977 (having operated informally for some time), led by Tim Miles of the WBC and his wife, Elaine.

In addition to following in the wake of the WBC, many of these organisations had a further connection: their founders and leaders had personal experience of dyslexia. Naidoo, whose father was Indian and mother Norwegian, came from a family 'riddled with dyslexia', including a cousin who attended a dyslexia specialist school in Norway.[31] Marion Welchman and Wendy Fisher – 'powerfully strong, evangelical ladies' when it came to dyslexia – both encountered dyslexia after seeking support for their children, who were struggling with the condition.[32] Helen Arkell had dyslexia herself, initially identified by the Danish dyslexia pioneer Edith

Susan Hampshire, actress and dyslexia campaigner, whose mother founded the Hampshire School, London. Source: Flickr.

Norrie.[33] The daughter of an ambassador, it was initially assumed that Arkell's language difficulties stemmed from moving home so frequently.[34] Experience of dyslexia personally, or through a family member, has been a hallmark of researchers, teachers and advocates across dyslexia's history.[35] Often, such experience has been their introduction to the condition.

The preponderance of mothers over fathers in addressing dyslexia was seen not just in the professional dyslexia community, but the general population.[36] Joyce Hargrave-Wright, a teacher involved in the WBC's early years and later the creation of the BDA, recalls that it was usually mothers who sought diagnosis and assistance for their children:

> It's nearly always mum. Mum will come and do this. When I first started testing [in the 1970s], I never really saw men at all. Gradually, mum would drag along dad as well, and he'd sit there. Certainly, in the consulting rooms, they [often] sit with their chair back and do not really take part in it at all.

Outside traditionally gendered childcare roles, Hargrave-Wright suggests there may have been further reasons for fathers' disengagement: 'Whether it's because they don't want to admit anything [their own dyslexia], I don't know; or, the fact that in so many cases it [the child's dyslexia] was through dad, that's where the inheritance came from'.[37] Either way, it was mothers who took charge of seeking support.

Such emotional connection extended beyond the familial. Teachers and specialists often recall, in detail, the first pupils they encountered with the condition.[38] Margaret Rooms, a specialist dyslexia teacher at Chelmsford Hall preparatory school in Eastbourne, who later became a central figure at the Dyslexia Institute, recalls:

> I remember one particular boy, this one boy, and I must have observed him for about twenty minutes – clearly very, very intelligent. I saw his work and I saw his handwriting, and I came out of this room and I was actually prepared to do that job for nothing by then. It was just so interesting and I couldn't wait to start.[39]

Constituting the majority of nursery and primary school teachers from the 1960s to present, women were more likely to be encountering pupils with dyslexia at the age when symptoms were emerging.[40] That they were also more likely than men to want to help such children has been suggested by some within the dyslexia movement, mirroring the conventional construction of teaching as a feminine occupation, linked to women's traditional role as mothers/carers of children.[41]

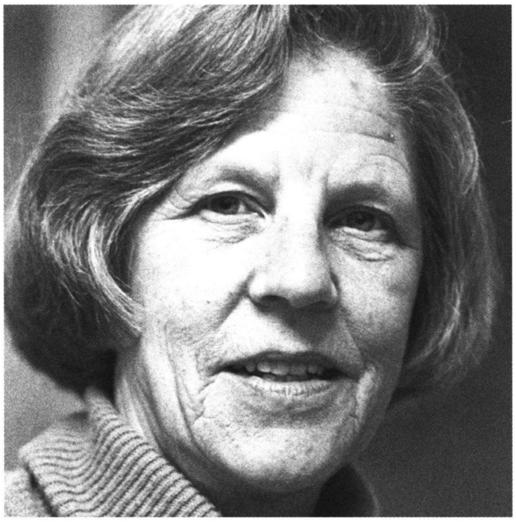
A mother's desire to help her child lay behind the campaign work of Susan Hampshire, a celebrated actress and the first celebrity in Britain to 'come out' as having dyslexia in the early 1970s. In the 1940s, Hampshire began her education at a school in London founded by her mother, June: 'It was she, when I was about four maybe five, [who] was worried about me, so she started this little school [The Hampshire School] for me'.[42] Given the lack of awareness of dyslexia at the time, it was not until 1971 that Hampshire was formally identified as dyslexic, by White Franklin of the WBC. After learning of her dyslexia, Hampshire says, 'I decided to be very involved and stand up and be counted, and worked probably three or four days a week... talking about it [dyslexia], going on the radio, visiting schools or whatever; involved with what was then called the Dyslexia Institute'.[43] Later, Hampshire became president of the BDA, and worked with the Helen Arkell Dyslexia Centre. Of her work, Hampshire recalls:

> That was a labour of love. I was doing it to raise money for dyslexia, it wasn't my personal profit. It didn't raise huge quantities, but it raised a lot in those days to help.[44]

Hampshire's advocacy as part of the work of the organisations above was crucial in achieving ultimate political recognition for dyslexia. At the time, it stood against widespread antipathy to the term, from policy-makers, educational psychologists and others. As Naidoo recalls:

> [Many] people thought that children with reading problems were simply hiding behind medical mothers and so on. We published the proceedings [of a WBC conference] and there was one man whose voice was sort of squeaking [with indignation]. They [some educational psychologists] thought it was children hiding behind neurological [excuses].[45]

Helen Arkell, speaking of the 1970s, recalls that 'there used to be articles in the paper saying what nonsense it was and how it was anxious mothers who'd



Helen Arkell, founder of the Helen Arkell Dyslexia Centre in 1971, one of the first specialist dyslexia centres in the country. Source: The Arkell Family/Helen Arkell Dyslexia Centre.

rather have a dyslexic child than a stupid one and all this sort of thing. This went on really for years and years and years'.[46] Government officials, both local and national, were reticent to engage, fearful of the resources that would need to be expended if the condition was acknowledged and claiming that the evidence base was not yet conclusive.[47] Their views were encapsulated in the 1972 Tizard report, *Children with Specific Reading Difficulties*: 'we are highly sceptical of the view that a syndrome of developmental dyslexia with a specific underlying cause and specific symptoms has been identified'.[48] References to dyslexia in the 1975 Bullock report, *A Language for Life*, were similarly brief.[49]

Running through these debates was a clear gender divide. Predominately, the civil servants and ministers rejecting dyslexia were male, reflecting the political sphere of the time.[50] Asked by the WBC in 1962 for their view on dyslexia's existence, the Ministry of Education, through a male civil servant on behalf of the minister, Edward Boyle, replied: 'Your short question looks so easy to answer, but it represents too simple a concept of the underlying factors causing reading delay. For this reason my answer must be "No"'.[51] Further requests were similarly rebuffed.[52] At the local level, Jennifer Salter, a specialist teacher lobbying her local authority for support for her son, was dismissed as a 'belligerent woman', an experience shared by other mothers.[53] Even within the dyslexia community, gender divides were apparent. Tim Miles recalls Marion Welchman being introduced to the WBC 'in a rather disdainful voice, as "a mother from Bath who thinks she may be able to do something". At the time, of course, none of us knew how much this mother from Bath would be able to contribute to the understanding of dyslexia not only in Britain but on a worldwide scale'.[54]

'Middle-class myth': gender, class and dyslexia (1962-1978)

The pre-eminent role of women in early concern with dyslexia necessarily intersected with class. Generally, the movement was led by those from middle-class backgrounds: a prerequisite given that the early momentum of the movement often required volunteer or poorly remunerated labour. Women from families of means, or whose husbands were professionals able to support the family financially, could more easily undertake such work than others. In this way, they reflected the social characteristics of women in other contemporary social movements.[55] Coming from well-educated and socially connected backgrounds also meant that such mothers had greater awareness of the condition and so recognised it in their own children, especially prior to government acknowledgement of dyslexia and state programmes of support.[56] Ironically however, the prominent involvement of middle-class women in early teaching, research and advocacy also led to accusations, from government and elsewhere, that dyslexia was a 'middle-class myth' used by wealthier families to pathologise and so explain the poor academic performance of their children.

The association of dyslexia with the middle classes has marked dyslexia since the earliest Victorian accounts of 'word blindness', which generally focused on middle-class pupils brought to doctors by professional families concerned with their children's reading difficulties.[57] In part, this stemmed from concerns about later employability, with literacy increasingly being required by the burgeoning professional class (see below).[58] With the increasing role of women in the dyslexia community from the 1960s onward, dyslexia as 'middle-class myth' began to acquire more gendered connotations. The patient files of the WBC, for example, show that the preponderance of places were self-funded, with many children living in relatively wealthy parts of south-west London and the broader Surrey and Berkshire region.[59] Most of these children were brought to Naidoo's centre by their mothers, echoing the belief that fathers were often reticent to engage with the condition.[60]

Why did this demographic's interest in dyslexia emerge at this time? In the wake of the 1944 Education Act, schooling was made compulsory until the age of fifteen and the eleven-plus examination was rolled-out across England and Wales.[61] Effectively, of course, this created a two-tier education system. High academic performance, and at an earlier age, was becoming more crucial to successful life outcomes, in education, employment and elsewhere. Such educational reform sat within the context of broader economic restructuring. During the 1950s, British manufacturing was at a peak, but declined precipitously in the decades that followed.[62] The professional classes expanded, alongside an attendant requirement for high-level skill in literacy, precipitating a series of government reports concerned with the failure of children to read.[63] Naidoo's middle-class mothers were looking for

Bevé Hornsby, working with a child with dyslexia at the Hornsby International Dyslexia Centre, London (late 1970s). Source: UK Dyslexia Archive.

support for their children not just to get them ahead in this new economic landscape, but to keep them afloat.

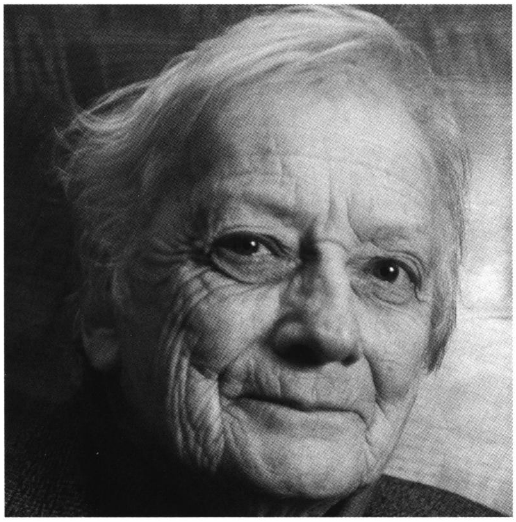
As such, the organisations following the WBC exhibited a similar social geography to their predecessor. Three of these, the BDA (Bath, later Bracknell), the Helen Arkell Dyslexia Centre (London, later Frensham) and the Dyslexia Institute (Staines, later Egham) have been located for the majority of their duration within twenty miles (thirty kilometres) of each other across the wealthy Surrey/Berkshire border. For Hargrave-Wright, reflecting on the origins of the BDA and the Dyslexia Institute: 'When you look at the population in Surrey, you've got a lot of very caring parents, which you get everywhere, but they were in a position to help. They had the facilities and they were prepared to form groups and local associations and spend money, which if you're in a big city and in a poor area, it just wouldn't happen'.[64] Similar patterns were observed elsewhere, often because of limited state recognition: 'A lot of the people who were coming to [Margaret Newton's dyslexia] unit in Aston were parents who had been told by educational psychologists and by local authorities that dyslexia did not exist and who were really battling with local authorities for recognition'.[65] For Lynette Bradley, a leading researcher of the period: 'The [middle-class] parents held the school to account – that was where the difference was'.[66]

To expedite provision, founders of many dyslexia organisations relied on social networks. With Joanne Pollock and Elisabeth Waller, Helen Arkell was able to 'beg, borrow or steal a house in London and so set up [her dyslexia teaching centre] there'.[67] Later, Arkell used premises in Frensham, Surrey, where her family was based. The same was true of dyslexia specialist schools. In the mid-1970s, Daphne Hamilton-Fairley, a speech and language therapist who sometimes taught at the Helen Arkell Dyslexia Centre, was increasingly encountering children with dyslexia during her work.[68] By 1976, she and the children's parents realised the need for a dedicated school, hosting a 'Spell Ball' at the Intercontinental Hotel on Park Lane in London to raise funds for the purpose. One of the children's fathers, a pop group manager, was able to recruit Billy Connolly and Pamela Stephenson as cabaret, and the ball raised over £50,000. By the early 1980s, Fairley House School was opening in Prince's Gate, Kensington: 'It was magic from the point of view of parent power, really, and how they'll fight for their children. It was an absolute eye-opener'.[69]

Elsewhere, to circumvent continuing gender divides in employment, women grafted their labour onto conventional power structures in order to advance the dyslexia movement. Maggie Snowling, who worked with Bevé Hornsby at the Barts Dyslexia Clinic, recalls that in the early 1970s, 'she [Hornsby] basically just moved into Barts Hospital and took over some rooms that were vacant and started a clinic. That was how it worked in those days'.[70] At the Bangor Dyslexia Unit during the same period, Elaine Miles recalls that 'finding people to join the team was not difficult [...] there were several college wives who had been teachers, had small children and therefore did not want to commit themselves to a full-time job'.[71] The pay, however, was 'missionary', according to the unit's later director, Ann Cooke: 'We were all part-time and there were no contracts. We were all paid on what I call "pinkies": claim forms that you put in either every month or every half term'.[72] 'It was accepted in those days', says Miles, 'that your husband's salary should support you, too'.[73]

The dyslexia movement's association with the middle classes, however, despite expediting its success, also had more ambiguous outcomes. Perhaps most obviously, in aligning dyslexia with a particular socio-economic group, it contributed to the obfuscation of dyslexia in others. Studies have perennially shown, for example, that rates of illiteracy and dyslexia are above average amongst prisoner and young offender populations – part of a broader landscape of disadvantage, including poverty, access to schooling and quality of home environment.[74] While the dyslexia community was broadly aware that dyslexia existed across socio-economic groups (see next section), the absence of widespread state support until the 1980s meant that remedial efforts were, until then, generally supported by and directed toward wealthier families. The government, though, invoked dyslexia's association with the middle-classes to challenge its existence, implying that it was an invention of overly concerned middle-class parents. Ironically, of course, dyslexia's association with the middle classes existed in large part *because* of government reticence to engage in the area.

Government efforts to undermine dyslexia by highlighting its middle-class associations were well exemplified by the pressure placed on the chair of the 1978 Warnock report, *Special Educational Needs*. In the early



Baroness Warnock, author of the influential 1978 report, *Special Educational Needs*, pressured not to use the term 'dyslexia'. Source: Academy of Medical Sciences/www.flickr.com

Margaret Thatcher, Secretary of State for Education and Science (1970-74), who commissioned the Warnock Report. Source: Rob Bogaerts/Nationaal Archief/wikimedia.org

1970s, the government tasked Mary Warnock 'to review educational provision in England, Scotland and Wales for children and young people handicapped by disabilities of body or mind'.[75] However, despite receiving evidence from the BDA, the Bangor Dyslexia Unit, Bevé Hornsby, the Dyslexia Institute and various local associations, the final report mentioned dyslexia only twice, largely deferring to the findings of the Tizard report, where the existence of a specific kind of reading difficulty called dyslexia had been dismissed. The lack of willingness to engage with dyslexia came not from Warnock, though, but the civil servants who had been tasked with overseeing her review, presumably at the direction of the Department of Education and Science, led at the time of the review's announcement by Margaret Thatcher.

Warnock recalls that 'by '74, when the committee of enquiry was set-up, although the department was perfectly aware that there were a comparatively large number of children with special-needs that was when their complete hostility to the concept of dyslexia became clear to me'.[76] As Warnock continues: 'I was summoned by the civil servant responsible for the committee and he said: "You should not suggest that there is a special category of learning difficulty called dyslexia."'[77] Warnock, for her part, challenged him:

> 'You can't say that dyslexia is not a learning difficulty', then I trotted out this boy [with dyslexia] at Hertford [College, Oxford] and all the things I knew – anecdotal, but still. He didn't answer the question that even Oxford University recognised dyslexia as requiring various exemptions from this and that. He simply said: 'well, I expect he is a middle class boy'. Of course he was, and that was the very end of the conversation.[78]

For justification, officials drew on the Isle of Wight studies of reading difficulties, a series of epidemiological studies led by Mike Rutter and Bill Yule, where the term dyslexia had not been used.[79] Again, this was presumably to avoid the requests for support that acknowledging the condition would trigger. While the 1981 Education Act implemented several of the Warnock report's recommendations, the effective omission of dyslexia from the latter meant that dyslexia's existence was not yet inscribed in legislation.[80]

As in the previous section, it is noteworthy that this particular debate was largely split along gender lines. As there, Warnock invoked a memorable pupil with dyslexia whom she had encountered during her academic career to stress the existence of the condition in the face of official intransigence. Civil servants attached to her review, however, echoed the sentiments of their predecessors in the 1960s, claiming that the evidence base remained inconclusive. In the dyslexia community, by contrast, it was widely assumed that reticence to engage with dyslexia stemmed from an unwillingness to commit the necessary funds to tackle the problem.[81] This was despite spending on public services, including education, rising by five per cent in real terms over the period 1960-1975, alongside a broader expectation in society that the state should provide support for those with special educational needs, as literacy in particular became increasingly important in accessing good schooling and the professions.[82] The suggestion by government that the science of dyslexia was inadequate, however, is worthy of further consideration; an area that, like others in the dyslexia movement, was often led by women and entwined with providing emotional support to those with the condition.

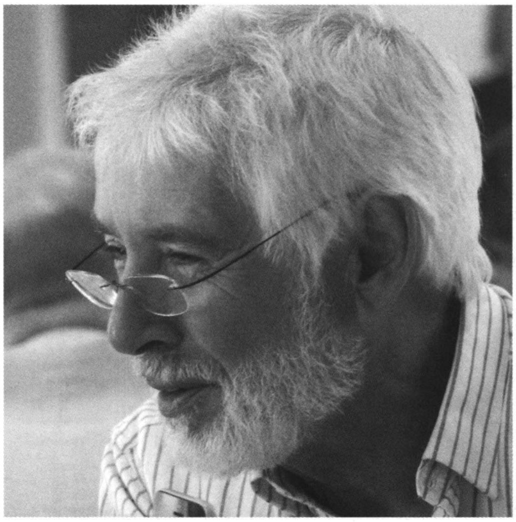
'Soft science?' Dyslexia, gender and emotion (1968-present)

Providing emotional support to those with dyslexia has marked the history of the dyslexia community since its earliest days.[83] This has been a key component of dyslexia advocacy, but also intersected with scientific work on the condition. Psychologists of dyslexia have gone on to found specialist schools; specialist teachers have worked with universities to create assessment criteria; dyslexia scientists, like others in the field, have often had personal, usually familial connection to the condition.[84] This emphasis has been important, given the historically adverse treatment of those with dyslexia in schools and elsewhere.[85] However, the 'blurring' of the divide between science and emotion has arguably contributed to critiques of dyslexia research as an unverified science, as highlighted above; critiques that have also been informed by the central role of women in the same.

Prior to government recognition of dyslexia, the experience of children in schools and elsewhere was often difficult. In *The Scars of Dyslexia*, Janice Edwards has traced the emotional challenges faced by children with dyslexia in the 1970s and 1980s, prior to diagnosis or adequate support, in schools ill-equipped to assist them.[86] Bill Watkins, who founded East Court dyslexia specialist school in 1983 with Gaye Watkins, Mike Thomson and Rosemary Scott, recalls that: 'Some of them [pupils] when they came were so damaged and bruised by their experiences at [non-specialist] independent schools or prep schools. One dear little kid, he was tiny, one of the masters had just thrown him across the room – he was just frightened out of his wits of males'.[87] Patience Thomson, former head of Fairley House School, who also taught young offenders with dyslexia, recalls of the latter: 'Most of them in their teens had got into trouble, because you are, at school, humiliated [if you have dyslexia] on a daily basis, and you're bored silly if you can't read and everybody else is'.[88]

Given such experiences, a significant aspect of the dyslexia advocacy movement has therefore been about fostering self-esteem.[89] This sought to convince pupils that they were neither 'lazy' nor 'thick', two common accusations of the time, echoed more recently in the quotes at the head of this paper.[90] For Steve Chinn, who in 1986 founded a dyslexia specialist school, Mark College, and also worked in dyslexia research, 'it was about giving them [pupils] the confidence to know they could do stuff' and 'we couldn't quickly give them a kick start and stick them back into mainstream education, it was kind of the ongoing building of confidence'.[91] For Lynette Bradley, a teacher and dyslexia researcher, it was about stressing difference, not deficiency:

> I used to point out to them that if Picasso had painted in the same way as everybody else, he wouldn't have been famous. It was because he did things his way that made him famous, and that it was the same with poetry [which Bradley encouraged her pupils to write]. It didn't have to rhyme: you could put thoughts into words and it would be beautiful [...] It just sort of broke my heart that these children, so clever, have kind of come unstuck because they can't understand a code.



Bill Watkins, who co-founded East Court dyslexia specialist school in 1983 with Gaye Watkins, Mike Thomson and Rosemary Scott. Source: Andrew Carslaw/UK Dyslexia Archive.

There was also an emphasis on emotional support in the science of dyslexia, often because the role of scientist overlapped with that of teacher and/or advocate. At Aston University, Margaret Newton was a leading psychologist of dyslexia, 'but she was also out there helping kids', often through *pro bono* work with families at her consultancy.[92] At the Bangor Dyslexia Unit, Ann Cooke was not only a researcher who published *Tackling Dyslexia*, but also a teacher, 'and I think there was a lot of, you wouldn't call it counselling that went on [with children], but confidence building'.[93] Maggie Snowling says: 'I'm passionate about it [dyslexia] and I'm also a scientist. I've lived through this as a mother, a scientist, a sibling, a daughter, and I think it's just terrible the way a skill, which is essentially just the symptom of a literate society, can put a lid on people and can actually damage their self-esteem'.[94] In other words, contrary to traditional masculine conceptions of science as emotionless and detached, dyslexia research has frequently been undertaken with an emotional connection to those affected.[95]

As this paper has shown, while this was key in driving the movement forward and supporting those with dyslexia, it also opened up dyslexia research to accusations that it was a 'soft science'. Margaret Newton, for example, was never made professor, a position that would have been commensurate with her academic contributions. Snowling, during her work on dyslexia in the early 1980s, recalls 'the '[hostile] recep-

Maggie Snowling, a leading psychologist of dyslexia, who worked with Bevé Hornsby at the Hornsby International Dyslexia Centre. Source: Maggie Snowling.

tion I had when I tried to find kids for my research and people saying: "It doesn't exist; go away"; really being obstructive and attacking me as a young scientist'.[96] Such accounts sit, of course, alongside the broader dismissals of Welchman as 'a mother from Bath', Salter as a 'belligerent woman' and mothers of dyslexic children as 'over-anxious'. The long-lasting reluctance of political authorities to accept dyslexia research, therefore, might be noted alongside the fact that sexism has often marked the experience of women in science.[97] It would seem fair to suggest that such reticence may have derived at least partly from what Deborah Thien has called 'the binary trope of emotion as negatively positioned in opposition to reason, as objectionably soft and implicitly feminised'.[98]

The interplay of science, emotion and gender has also worked in other ways. Until the 1980s, dyslexia was most commonly diagnosed via the 'discrepancy diagnostic model'.[99] Under this, dyslexia was seen as reading disorder present despite 'adequate' education, socio-economic background and intelligence, with the 1968 definition of the World Federation of Neurology proving particularly influential.[100] In other words, dyslexia was deemed unconnected to environmental factors, and could occur only in those of average intelligence or above. As the Rose definition at the start of this paper shows, dyslexia is now widely recognised in dyslexia research as existing across the intellectual spectrum, but the discrepancy model, in exonerating parents from causing their children's dyslexia and suggesting that it could occur only in otherwise (statistically) normally performing individuals, made the model popular amongst parents, usually mothers, seeking to explain their children's reading difficulties.[101] In validating their concerns and assuring them of their children's intelligence, it was a label that they favoured.[102]

In this way, the discrepancy model is a useful vehicle to approach dyslexia's conceptualisation by the dyslexia community, including those traversing the science/advocacy divide. In separating dyslexic difficulties from broader intelligence, the model brought dyslexia firmly under the purview of specific, rather than general/severe, learning difficulties. In this way, it aligned with reports such as Warnock's, which while antagonistic to the term dyslexia itself, distinguished between 'specific' difficulties with reading, writing and spelling, and 'severe' difficulties affecting general learning ability, sometimes called learning disabilities.[103] The efficacy of this codification to the dyslexia community was twofold: it both reinforced dyslexia as an issue requiring government intervention, but could also be used to reassure those with dyslexia that their learning difficulties were limited.

It was this efficacy that perhaps provided discrepancy approaches with their longevity. By the 1980s, when the discrepancy model *per se* was falling out of scientific use, the emotional importance of approaches that decoupled dyslexia from either indolence or intellectual limitation remained. Kate Saunders, a former chief executive of the BDA, learnt of her dyslexia in the early 1980s. Studying with Margaret Newton at Aston University, Saunders recalls Newton first identifying her as having dyslexia:

> You're not stupid. You are intelligent enough to be at university. There is a reason why, even though you are intellectually able, you have been having these difficulties, there is a word for it: it is a pattern of difficulties, dyslexic difficulties. But I can teach you to be able to overcome these things, so that you will be able to pass your exams. That was my first ray of hope really.[104]

Thus, the intersection of science, gender and emotion has operated in at least two ways in the history of dyslexia. First, dyslexia researchers, often also being specialist teachers or parents, usually mothers, of children with dyslexia, have been actively involved in providing emotional support to those with dyslexia. In the process, they have blurred traditional divides between emotion and science through a unique nexus of research, care and emotional engagement. While this has been crucial to improving the life outcomes of those with dyslexia, it has also opened up the dyslexia label to accusations that it is an 'emotional' rather than 'scientific' construct (see below). Second, particular scientific understandings of dyslexia, notably the discrepancy diagnostic model, have often been mobilised by the dyslexia community, especially mothers, to both scientifically validate their children's reading difficulties and disassociate these from either upbringing or broader intelligence.

Here, the myths outlined at the start of this paper might be reiterated. For Liddle, dyslexia has been an emotional 'crutch', used by worried parents to 'support' themselves in the wake of their child's reading difficulties. In *The Dyslexia Debate*, Julian Elliott and Elena Grigorenko criticise dyslexia as a 'construct' that meets 'the social, psychological, political and emotional needs of multiple stakeholders'.[105] In part, dyslexia has been such a construct, but it might be noted that these stakeholders have often been those with dyslexia themselves, or their advocates. Indeed, it was the former's social, psychological, political and emotional needs that much of the movement has been directed toward, including those who have traversed the science/advocacy divide. But this emphasis has derived from the exigencies of supporting a previously unsupported group. In this way, the overlapping roles of many of those in the dyslexia community – as mothers, scientists, campaigners – provides a crucial context to these contemporary critiques.

Conclusion

The history of learning difficulties has encountered increasing attention in recent years, notably autism and ADHD.[106] These accounts have sought to establish how such difficulties have emerged as issues across contemporary society. Dyslexia, however, has largely gone unexplored. This paper has focussed on one aspect of dyslexia's history, the ongoing dyslexia debate, to show how a historical perspective can help to better understand a discussion that has hitherto been conducted principally by researchers in the science of reading. It has shown how many of the central tenets of the 'dyslexia myth' are entwined with the role of women in the dyslexia movement. In particular, it has suggested that dyslexia's putative connections to 'worried mothers', the middle classes and contestable science each have a particular story in which women have been prominent. In shedding light on these stories, oral history has been crucial, capturing a past that has largely gone unrecorded.

In particular, this paper has traced how early concern with dyslexia was led by women, many of whom had personal, familial or professional experience of the condition. Dyslexia was less an invention of these women, however, than a reflection of several factors, including amongst others: gendered employment roles from the 1960s onward; an increasing focus on the educational performance of children; and the fact that mothers, rather than fathers, were primarily responsible for childcare. In the context of a society in which educational attainment and career opportunities increasingly required high levels of literacy, their concern was crucial in driving forward progress in dyslexia research, teaching and advocacy, and in assisting these children. The high proportion of these women from middle-class backgrounds was, absent central funding and state recognition, crucial to their success, enabling many to work for little remuneration and others to raise funds through social networks.

Their work was rewarded. In 1987, the dyslexia movement achieved political recognition for dyslexia after an announcement by the Department for Education and Science: 'The Government recognise dyslexia and recognise the importance to the education progress of dyslexic children, their long-term welfare and successful-function in adult life, that they should have their needs identified at an early stage'.[107] In the years that followed, greater state support for pupils with dyslexia became available.[108] But prior to this, government reluctance was the norm. Running through this debate was a broad gender divide, with (predominately) female lobbyists frequently coming up against (predominately) male policymakers, who were almost uniformly sceptical of dyslexia. Beyond gendered employment roles of the time, a case can be made that, in the science of dyslexia especially, reluctance to engage was based on implicit assumptions about the value of this female-led undertaking. Certainly, dismissals of dyslexia research and advocacy have often been couched in gendered terms.

Charting this history is especially relevant in the wake of current retrenchment in funding for dyslexia, in addition to the ongoing dyslexia debate.[109] The achievements of those considered in this paper are threatened by these cuts; the BDA continues to field calls from parents who have been told by local authorities and others that dyslexia does not exist.[110] As stated above, the scientific validity of debates around dyslexia is beyond this paper's remit, albeit the weight of evidence in dyslexia's favour would appear to remain substantial. What this paper has sought to do is chart the historical factors that have informed contemporary critiques of dyslexia, highlighting the advances made for people with dyslexia by the dyslexia community in the process. They may have been worried mothers, but their concern with a group largely ignored by society – who experienced difficulty with a skill society has made all but crucial to everyday life – has had a profound and positive effect on those with dyslexia.

Acknowledgements
Thank you to the editorial board of *Oral History* for their helpful comments and the UK Dyslexia Archive team at St John's College, Oxford – Maggie Snowling, Kate Nation, William Whyte, Kieran Fitzpatrick, Robert Evans, Denise Cripps and Steve Chinn – for their support. Thank you especially to the interviewees featured in this paper for their contributions. Naturally, any mistakes that remain, despite the assistance of the above, are the author's. This work was supported by the John Fell Fund (reference 152/045) and Wellcome Trust Institutional Strategic Support Fund 2016-2018.

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33. Interview with Helen Arkell, educationalist and founder of the Helen Arkell Dyslexia Centre; recorded by Maggie Snowling, 6 May 2014.

34. Interview with Bernadette McLean, educationalist and former principal of the Helen Arkell Dyslexia Centre; recorded by Philip Kirby, 5 July 2017.

35. Interview with Maggie Snowling, 30 November 2016; interview with Jennifer Salter, specialist dyslexia teacher; recorded by Kieran Fitzpatrick, 6 December 2017; interview with Robin Salter, former vice-chair of the BDA and co-founder of the European Dyslexia Association; recorded by Philip Kirby, 6 December 2017; interview with Joyce Hargrave-Wright, educationalist and dyslexia expert; recorded by Robert Evans, 25 October 2017; interview with Kate Saunders, former chief executive of the BDA; recorded by Philip Kirby, 4 January 2018; interview with Patience Thomson, former head teacher of Fairley House dyslexia specialist school; recorded by Denise Cripps, 5 July 2017.

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37. Interview with Joyce Hargrave-Wright, 25 October 2017.

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43. Interview with Susan Hampshire, 15 May 2017. The Dyslexia Institute became Dyslexia Action in 2006 after merging with the Hornsby International Dyslexia Centre.

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65. Interview with Kate Saunders, 4 January 2018.

66. Interview with Lynette Bradley, 22 December 2016.

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