

DECONSTRUCTING NORMAL

"Nobody realizes that some people expend tremendous energy merely to be normal."

Albert Camus, c.1949 (Eoht.info, 2018)

INTRODUCTION

I recently went to dinner with a friend. Whilst describing her reaction to a stressful situation, she proudly proclaimed that she had reacted 'normally'. A few months previously, over a drink, she had disclosed that she had been diagnosed with a mental health disorder. I asked the appropriate questions and the conversation gradually moved onto other topics and carried on as normal. As we headed home she thanked me. When I asked, "for what", she replied, "for treating me like a normal person". In both incidents I found her ideation of normal to be problematic and assured her that there was no reason for her to feel that she wasn't normal, adding, "who's to say what normal is anyway?"

Whilst mental health is undoubtedly one characteristic of personal identity, an inexhaustible number of factors play into individual identities including sexuality, gender, physical disabilities, race, and social class. It is well documented within the academy that much work has been done to deflate notions of normativity surrounding many of these issues individually, however, my aim is to consider a more holistic approach and to look more closely at how personal and social expectations of normalcy impede our sense of self.

STRUCTURE

The term 'normal' is actually somewhat of an anomaly in itself. It generates binaries; normal/abnormal; same/different; good/bad, however, it is also multifarious, operating as the median within a spectrum, as in; light-normal-heavy; weak-normal-strong; or in terms of mental health, manic-normal-depressive. Whilst it may not always be identified as the highest within an order, its use does propose a hierarchical structure, allowing it to become dominant over something or someone else.

LANGUAGE

It is often considered neutral by the user and it is intended to be understood benignly, however, its usage automatically generates a sense of 'Other', causing it to become derogatory. It is defined by the Oxford Dictionaries, online edition, as an adjective meaning:

1. Conforming to a standard; usual, typical, or expected. (2018)

In other words, one is expected to behave 'normally' in order to conform to social standards. In this sense, it affirms a notion of 'Other', as non-conforming behaviour is considered deviant. It goes on:

- 1.1 (of a person) free from physical or mental disorders. (2018)

As physical and mental disorders are most often beyond a person's control, it is no wonder that anyone considered to fall outside of the 'norm' would find its use offensive. This type of definition alone creates a stigma that extends far beyond discourses within the academy and infiltrates the social vernacular and universal psyche.

CONTROL

It is through this identity of conformity that political power is played out over non-normative classes. Inferior legal rights are bestowed upon those of non-conforming genders, sexualities, race, religions, and social classes. Whilst the environmental and medical provisions allowed for people with physical and mental disorders are often substandard, catering primarily to the needs of 'normal' people. The assumption of normalcy creates a sense of superiority allowing ruling classes to dictate the rights of 'abnormal' people.

MASKING

This political control over 'normal' can often lead to a masking of identity. In the case of non-physical manifestations of normalcy such as sexuality or religion, it becomes easier to mask deviancies and pass within society as 'normal'. Expectations of conformity can be met to the outside world while the acts of non-conformity can be enacted in secret. This liberation is not afforded where race, gender and physical disabilities are concerned. These differences are outwardly visible and therefore immediately recognisable. However, an attempt to mask non-physical, abnormalities, is not always passable either. As cited by Irit Rogoff in *'Smuggling' - An Embodied Criticality*, Melek Ulugay relates an account of running from police in Turkey. She describes a smuggler seeing through her disguise: ". . . no matter how hard you try to look like someone else, people always see, they always detect the real person hiding behind" (2006).

REBELLION

None of this is to say that my concerns lie solely in the use of 'normal' as a diminutive term, quite the opposite. I believe that it is a powerful term both as a means of imposing control but also as a means of opposing it. Notions of abnormality and non-conformity create a sense of awareness of the self and thus a desire to rebel in defence of one's own rights. Camus identifies:

The rebel, . . . refuses to allow anyone to touch what he is. He is fighting for the integrity of one part of his being. He does not try, primarily, to conquer, but simply to impose. (1956, 18)

But through this sense of self and rebellion, a further desire and sense of community are formed. Through the rebellion of one, the struggles of many are identified, he also states:

When he rebels, a man identifies himself with other men and so surpasses himself, and from this point of view human solidarity is metaphysical. But for the moment we are only talking of the kind of solidarity that is born in chains. (1956, 17)

AWKWARDNESS

Adam Kotsko proposes the notion of awkwardness as being an alternative to abnormal and suggests that this redefining of what abnormal might mean generates a sense of solidarity. He recognises it as a way of unifying nonconformity. In a 2010 column, *The Bond of the Awkward*, in the Guardian newspaper, he rhetorically asks:

Is it any wonder that people are drawn to awkwardness, that strange social bond that takes place outside the realm of normal social constraints? In an era where social norms can only tell us no, should we be surprised if people enjoy saying no to social norms themselves? (2010)

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In conclusion, I return to the question that I posed to my friend: "who's to say what normal is", Throughout my life, I have found myself rebelling against notions of normality and conformity and yet fighting for equality, sometimes through necessity but more often through a conscious desire for change. Some may see this fight as a paradox; surely fighting for equality compounds notions around the superiority of normalcy? However, I feel that it is through this struggle that ideations of normal can be dispelled. By inclusion of diversity and non-conformity, normality may eventually become diluted and ultimately eradicated.

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