Lecture Normalcy

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Why is the world built the way it is? Because we as a culture have decided that a certain kind of person is the ideal upon which our social institutions- from schools to stores to places of employment- are structured. This ideal has a name: it is called ‘normal’.

The idea of a norm is not a natural part of human nature than it is a characteristic of a certain kind of society.

Pre-industrial: ideal. Exemplified by the “divine” naked body, the statue of David, a body set as an idealized body not found in reality. The creation of these ideal bodies in art and sculpture in per-industrial times was a reflection of a certain way of being. All members of society are less than the ideal. There was only one true perfect being: God. Everyone else was lesser- fallen from God due to original sin, and thus imperfect.

( Pre-Industrial age: contrast between monstorious and natural (Baynton 35), later displaced by normalcy. )

Industrial era saw the rise of concept of normalcy.

Statistical science. Began as political statistics ("promotion of sound, well-informed state policy"). Concept applied to the body via medicine, especially in the regulation of bodies for industry (4). (Barnatt makes same point) industrial age “disability became to be defined in economic terms as the inability to work (5) Here we come to the creation of a whole apparatus of measurement and classification which are still with us today.

Quetlet: the average man. This overlaps with the ideal in that the average man is idolized (5) This sets u the category of the average, on which much of public policy is based today.

Norm: Concept of the norm becomes most apparent with the use of the bell curve. Take height- the average man in the US is around 5-11’. The majority of men are clustered around this height, give or take a few inches. But some are smaller, Others are taller. So the ideal may be the ‘average’ man, the middle of the bell curve.

But scientisits weren’t satisfied. They added quartiles, which ranks normalcy hierarchally. The average is fine, but above average is ideal, (for height, maybe above average lets you become a basketball player?) and below average becomes something else, something stigmatized. (5) This becomes even more explicit with the development of IQ tests, which measured intelligence. Those who measured below average are given labels which ascribe problems to them-- disabled. Those above average are given resources to succeed.

The idea of normalcy was quickly ingrained in culture. Challenges to power responded to by references to standards of normalcy – freed slaves were more infirm and more sickly, thus slavery was healthy. (Baynton 37). Doctors even came up with labels that ascribed disability to African American slaves. “Drapetomania”: tendency to flee, prevalent in slaves whose owners were too familiar with them. (38) “arguments were contradictory, incoherent or simply ludcrious” but all centered on disability.

Women similar discourses: suffragist: women 1) faced disability if forced to bear responsibility and 2) women too disabled to bear right to vote. Women responsed 1) not da 2) unfairly grouped with disabled 3) disabled by oppression.

Rather than avoiding the label of disability, by denying physical or sensory or cognitive difference, it is better to challenge the concept of normalcy which underlies the prejudices that different groups face in US society. We should move from a concept of normal to one of diversity. But not diversity that rejects difference, but one that accepts different bodies.