

Normalization and Discipline

Introduction

The concepts of “normalization” and “discipline” have received increasing attention in disability studies and philosophy of disability, due in large part to growing interest throughout the humanities and social sciences in the work of Michel Foucault. These theoretical debates are both complex and important for understanding disability. This entry offers some background of the term *normal* and its relation to normalization and discipline, provides an overview of Foucault’s claims about normalization and discipline, and indicates some of the distinct ways that disability theorists have used the concept of normalization in disability theory.

Background

In a number of places, Foucault aimed to show that normalization and discipline are vital mechanisms of a relatively recent form of power that he called “biopower”. Foucault described biopower in this way:

By [biopower] I mean a number of phenomena that seem to me to be significant, namely, the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power, or, in other words, how, starting from the eighteenth century, modern Western societies took on board the fundamental biological fact that human beings are a species. (2007, 1)

Overview of Foucault’s Claims

Foucault argued that the consolidation of the modern concept of “normal” legitimized and occurred in tandem with the new statistical knowledge and other techniques of population management that stemmed from biopower. The norm accomplished this expansion of power in two ways: (1) by enabling discipline to develop from a simple set of constraints into a mechanism; and (2) by transforming the negative restraints of the juridical into the more positive controls of normalization. Foucault regarded normalization as a central—if not *the* central—strategy of biopower’s management of “life”. Foucault claimed that, beginning in the eighteenth century, the power of the normal has combined with other powers such as the law and tradition, imposing new limits upon them. The normal, he explained, was established as a principle of coercion through the introduction of standardized education; through the organization of national medical professions and hospital systems that could circulate general norms of health; and through the standardization of industrial processes and products and manufacturing techniques.

Ian Hacking (1990) has noted that the first meaning of *normal* that any current English dictionary provides is something like “usual, regular, common, typical.” According to the Oxford English Dictionary, this usage became current after 1840, with the first citation of “normal, or typical” appearing in 1828. Hacking has noted that the modern sense of the word *normal* was not, however, furnished by education or cloistered study, but rather, by the study of life (161-162). Hacking explained that the word *normal* became indispensable because it provided a way to be objective about human beings, especially given the inseparability of the notion of normal from its opposite, namely, the pathological. The word *normal*, he wrote, “uses a power as old as Aristotle to bridge

the fact/value distinction, whispering in your ear that what is normal is also all right” (160). Hacking has also pointed out that although the normal stands “indifferently for what is typical, the unenthusiastic objective average, it also stands for what has been, good health, and what shall be, our chosen destiny” (169). It is especially noteworthy for disability studies that, as Hacking noted, our modern usage of the word *normal* evolved in a medical context.

In the late 1700s, there was a significant reconfiguration of the concept of the pathological and its relation to the normal. Disease came to be regarded as an attribute of individual organs, rather than as a characteristic of the entire body. Pathology, likewise, became the study of unhealthy organs, rather than the study of sick or diseased bodies. Unhealthy organs could be investigated, in part, by the chemistry of fluids, such as urine or mucus, that actual living beings secreted. The concept of the normal came into being as the inverse of this concept of pathology: a given state of affairs or process of the body was normal if it was not associated with a pathological organ. The pathological became defined as deviation from the normal and all variation became characterized as variation from the normal state. Pathology was no longer conceived as different in kind from the normal, but rather as continuous with, and as a deviation from, the normal (164). This new understanding of the normal and the pathological that emerged in the late 1700s is one, but only one, component of what Shelley Tremain has referred to as “the diagnostic style of reasoning” (see Tremain 2010, 2015), which is a style of reasoning that has enabled the consolidation and expansion of biopower.

Foucault (1977) argued that normalization thus became one of the great instruments of power at the close of the classical age, that is, the power that the norm harnessed was shaped through the disciplines that began to emerge at this historical moment (184). From the end of the eighteenth century, the indicators of social status, privilege, and group affiliation have been increasingly supplemented, if not replaced, by a range of degrees of normality that simultaneously indicate membership in a homogeneous social body (*viz.* a population) and serve to distinguish between subjects, divide them from each other, classify them, categorize them in a number of ways, and rank them in a host of hierarchies. In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault noted that normalization initially emerged in the eighteenth-century military school, orphanages, and boarding schools as an effective form of punishment. In Foucault’s terms, discipline is neither an institution, nor an apparatus, but rather a particular type of power and a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, and targets. Discipline is an “anatomy” of power, a technology of power that may be assumed by (1) particular institutions—such as, schools or hospitals—in order to achieve a certain end; or (2) authorities that use it as a means to reinforce and reorganize their established means of power; or (3) apparatuses that use it as their mode of functioning; or (4) state apparatuses whose primary function is to assure that discipline reigns over society in general—that is, the police (215-216). As a technology that facilitated the expansion of biopower, disciplinary normalization aims to make the body more efficient and calculated in its acts, movements, gesture, and expression, to produce a body that is “docile,” that is, a body that can be subjected, used, transformed, and improved. Modern discipline can be summed up thus: it enables subjects to act in order to constrain them.

Foucault (1977) claimed that disciplinary “punishment,”—that is, normalization—has brought into play five distinct normalizing operations: first, individual actions are referred to a totality that is simultaneously a field of comparison, a space of differentiation, and a rule to be followed;

second, individuals are in turn differentiated from each other in relation to this rule which functions as a minimal threshold, as an average, or as an optimal outcome towards which individuals must move; third, the natures, grades and levels, and abilities of individuals are hierarchized and quantified; fourth, these quantifying and hierarchizing measures introduce the constraint of a conformity that must be achieved; fifth, the limit of difference, the far side of “the abnormal” that will define difference *per se* in relation to all other specific differences, is codified and enforced by penalty (correction, segregation, and so on). The five elemental modes of normalization are thus: comparison, differentiation, hierarchy, homogeneity, exclusion. The punitive impulse that regulates normalization compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, and excludes individuals in order to homogenize a population that, by virtue of its homogeneity, can be more effectively utilized and modified. In short, the disciplinary power of the norm relies upon coercion, rather than open repression or violence (215-220).

Disability Theorists and Normalization

Due to its inescapable historical association with pathologization and coercive correction, the idea of normalization has a checkered past in disability theory and research. In the last decades of the twentieth century, some disability theorists and researchers promoted the idea of normalization as emancipatory, both individually and socially, and as a sign of both personal and social progress. Most notably, Wolf Wolfensberger gave birth to a social movement, grounded in the “normalization principle,” that denounced the forced institutionalization of “cognitively impaired people.” The “normalization movement” aimed to integrate these people into the wider community by enhancing their self-perceptions and abilities to advocate for themselves and transforming their appearances in order to make them more socially accepted (Yates 2015). Michael Oliver explained the principle upon which the normalization movement relied, in this way: “Normalization theory offers disabled people the opportunity to be given valued social roles in an unequal society which values some roles more than others” (Oliver, in Drinkwater 2015, 233). The normalization principle was eventually renamed “social role valorization” in order to stress the *normativity* of normalization. Chris Drinkwater (2015) has argued, however, that although normalization theory was renamed social role valorization, the power-knowledge regime that is productive of a “normal life” remained unexamined. As Drinkwater explained it, the motivational assumption that underlies these normalizing strategies is that certain people find it difficult to learn how to behave “appropriately,” that is, normally. Drinkwater argues that a more tacit assumption that underlies social role valorization is that these people *ought* to learn normal (valued) behaviors in order to acquire normal (that is, valued) lifestyles (233).

Conclusion and Future Directions

In Foucault’s 1978–79 lecture course at the Collège de France (later published in English as *The Birth of Biopolitics*), he linked his claims about the historical emergence of biopower and its objects with his approach to the theme of government (Foucault 2008). Recall that, for Foucault, modern power is productive rather than merely repressive: it produces objects and induces effects. Foucault argued that power is more a question of “government,” that is, the direction of conduct, than it is a question of confrontation between adversaries. Foucault used the term *government* in this sixteenth-century sense to refer to the art of government, that is, any form of activity that aims to shape, guide, or affect the conduct of oneself or someone else, proposing that the term be defined, in general, to mean “the conduct of conduct” (1982). In an important 1982 interview,

Foucault explained that he adopted this earlier, broad meaning of the term *government* because it encompasses both calculated modes of action that structure the field of possible action of oneself or other people and legitimately constituted forms of political and economic subjection. Analyses of force relations that construe power as government, that is, as the direction of conduct, take into consideration innumerable practices that have previously been assumed to fall outside the scope of power—including technologies of normalization that act as mechanisms for the systematic objectivization of subjects as (for instance) deaf, criminal, and mad, and techniques of self-improvement and self-transformation (technologies of the self) such as weight-loss programs and fitness regimes, assertiveness training, botox injections, breast implants, psychotherapy, and rehabilitation—in addition to recognizably power-laden procedures and practices such as state-generated prohibitions and punishments and global networks of social, economic, and political stratification, the deleterious effects of which congeal disproportionately along disabling, racialized, and gendered lines. Foucault maintained that although power appears to be merely repressive, the most effective exercise of power consists in guiding the possibilities of conduct and putting in order the possible outcomes. Thus, Foucault’s work on normalization and government instructs disability theorists and activists to develop new ways to resist and subvert the increasingly novel strategies and mechanisms that power produces, as well as to move beyond the confines of social models of disability that rely upon outdated and parochial notions of power as fundamentally repressive.

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