

Debunking Normalcy

“The only universal, if there is one, is the experience of the limitations of the body”

~ Irving Zola, 1989

1492 The social constructs of “the West” and “the other”

In 1492, both Columbus and Europe “discovered” the “other” or the “different,” the one who is different. This “other” created “difference”/s and concepts of “ability” and consequently, “disability.”

After Columbus, notions of the “other” questioned the full humanity of the Caribbean Taino and other Native peoples. This enabled Western Europe to self-identify as a unitary entity--advancing the social-political construct of Western culture as the universal ideal.¹

1850 *Inventing the Feeble Mind: A History of Mental Retardation in the United States*²

James W. Trent uses public documents, private letters, investigative reports, and rare photographs to explore our changing perceptions of mental retardation over the past [170] years. He contends that the economic vulnerability of mentally retarded people (and their families), more than the claims made for their intellectual or social limitations, has determined their institutional treatment.

Eugenics History: Indiana^{3,4}

Eugenics is a set of beliefs/practices aiming to improve the genetic quality of humanity--historically by excluding people and groups judged inferior and promoting those judged to be superior.

1899 Hoosier, Dr. Harry C. Sharp performed America’s first (voluntary) vasectomy for eugenical sterilization on a Jeffersonville, IN inmate patient.⁵

1905 Indiana passed one of America’s first restrictive marriage laws prohibiting the "mentally deficient, persons with a 'transmissible disease' and habitual drunkards" from marital unions.

1907 Indiana passed the world’s first Eugenics Law. The law provided for the involuntary sterilization of "confirmed criminals, idiots, imbeciles and rapists." In 1927, a revised law was used, but before it was repealed in 1974, over 2,400 of the Indiana’s most vulnerable citizens were *involuntarily* sterilized.

Indiana’s Eugenics Law actually codified white supremacy or normalcy

"If you don't understand racism/white supremacy, everything else that you think you understand will only confuse you."

~ Dr. Neely Fuller Jr.

In 1997, Roy Lowe noted aspects of eugenic thought has proved more pervasive and enduring when directed to schools than to the more spectacular arguments around sterilization.⁶

Eugenics, white supremacy, and normalcy: One and the same

Eugenics, also known as scientific racism, or racial hygiene, was the epitome of global racism. The white Anglo-Saxon was the standard of normality.

1920s Indiana State Fair Baby Contests

From 1921-1932, Indiana held Better Baby Contests that would “insure that Hoosiers were breeding the healthiest and most desirable human beings.”



1954 Special Education is a political concept

“This is not about education at all, it’s about power.” ~James Baldwin

The social-political invention of “LD” (Learning Disability) circumvented the 1954 Brown v. Board decision. Mainly Black boys were no longer segregated based on color. They were excluded from the regular classroom base on ability.

1970’s Dis/ability is a political concept

Critical disability studies (CDS) view disability as both a lived reality in which the experiences of people with disabilities are central to interpreting their place in the world, and as a social and political definition based on societal power relations. Emerging from the activism of disabled people in the 1970s, this area of study involves both academics and activists representing multiple disciplines and perspectives. It challenges approaches that pathologize physical, mental and sensory difference as being in need of correction, and instead advocates for both accommodation and equality for disabled people in all areas of life. CDS seek to change conventional notions of disabled people as pitiable, tragic victims who should adjust to the world around them. This charity model is criticized for providing badly needed services without engaging the underlying causes of social exclusion. Barriers to education, employment, transportation and a host of services, both public and private, all come under the scrutiny of critical disability studies, a field that works toward universal accessibility.⁷

There is no disability without normalcy

“The problem’s not the student with learning disabilities; it’s the way normalcy is constructed to create the “problem” of the learning disabled child.” ~ reworded from L. Davis, “Constructing Normalcy”

“I’m not deaf, you cant’ sign. You have a signing disability.” ~ reworded from L. Davis, “Constructing Normalcy”

“This comparison to a fictitious ‘normal child’ is the unethical process of normalcy.”

~ Merry Juerling

What is normalcy?

“If such a thing as a psycho-analysis of today’s prototypical culture were possible...such an investigation would needs show the sickness proper to the time to consist precisely in normality.”

~ Theodore Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, a seminal text in Critical Theory, 1950

The state of being usual, typical, expected, or “ordinary”

- The idea of “the norm” was first used between 1840-50
- The term normality was first used in 1849
- Normalcy was first used in 1857
- White supremacy was first used between 1865-70
- The eugenics term started between 1880-85

1997 *The Disability Studies Reader: Constructing Normalcy: The Bell Curve, the Novel and the Invention of the Disabled Body in the 19th Century*⁸

We live in a world of norms. Each of us endeavors to be normal... We consider what's the average person does, thinks, earns, or consumes. There is probably no area of contemporary life with some area of a norm, mean, or average has not been calculated.

To understand the disabled body, one must return to the concept of the norm, the normal body. I would like to focus not so much on the construction of disability as on the construction of normalcy. I do this because the problem is not the person with disabilities the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the problem of the disabled person.

A common assumption would be that some concept of the norm must have always existed. [P]eople seem to have an inherent desire to compare themselves to others. But the idea of a norm is less a condition of human nature than it is a feature of a certain kind of society. Recent work on the ancient Greeks, or pre-industrial Europe, and on tribal peoples, for example, show that disability was once regarded very differently from [today]. [T]he social processing of disabling arrived with industrialization and with a set of practices and discourse that are late too late 18th and 19 century notions of nationality, race, gender, criminality, sexual orientation, and so on.

2002 *The Hunt for Disability: The New Eugenics and the Normalization of School Children*⁹

This paper is an attempt to reconsider issues of sameness, difference, equality, and democracy in present public school systems. It focuses on the question of (dis)ability and the implications of rethinking (dis)ability as an ontological issue before its inscription as an educational one concerning the politics of inclusion. The everyday dividing, sorting, and classifying practices of schooling are reconsidered through an analysis of old and new discourses of eugenics as "quality control" of national populations. The paper suggests that in the transmogrification of old to new eugenic discourses, disability becomes re-inscribed as an outlaw ontology reinvesting eugenic discourse in a new language that maintains an ableist normativity. The paper concludes by considering the very difficult question of trying to imagine alternatives to sending the posse, out in schools.

2002 *Strattera: Drugs to normalize children with sitting disability*

In 2002, Eli Lilly's Strattera (strat-tir-uh) was approved by FDA for treating "sitting disability" (ADHD). It is non-stimulant medication thought to work by restoring the balance of certain natural substances (neuro-transmitters) in the brain. See (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atomoxetine>). For the year 2016, worldwide sales for Strattera was \$855,000,000.00, up from \$784,000,000.00 in 2015.¹⁰

2013 *A Disability History of the United States*

Covering the entirety of US history from pre-1492 to the present, Kim E. Nielsen's 2013 book is the first book to place the experiences of people with disabilities at the center of the American narrative. Throughout the book, Nielsen deftly illustrates how concepts of disability have deeply shaped the American experience-from deciding who was allowed to immigrate and establishing labor laws to justifying slavery and gender discrimination. Included are absorbing-at times horrific-narratives of blinded slaves being thrown overboard and women being involuntarily sterilized, as well as triumphant accounts of disabled miners organizing strikes and disability rights activists picketing Washington. Engrossing and profound, *A Disability History of the United States* fundamentally reinterprets how we view our nation's past: from a stifling master narrative to a shared history that encompasses us all.

The book's first chapter is one of its most effective, which is surprising given the difficulty of writing about the pre-Columbian era. Most historians struggle with pre-Columbian America because its oral Indian cultures have left few written sources. However, Nielsen seizes upon a few stories from

different tribes and focuses on how Indian peoples thought about disability. She describes how some Native Americans understood disability in relational terms, such as someone having weak community relationships, instead of conceptualizing disability in bodily terms. She also focuses on how "indigenous nations had little or no concept of mental illness prior to European contact, only the recognition of unhealthy imbalance." Nielsen effectively uses these unfamiliar views to help readers denaturalize their own understandings of disability and begin exploring the historical contingency of disability.

2017 The Myth of the Average <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hfdokYm1K4E>

A book by Harvard education professor Todd Rose is titled, *The End of Average*. Rose says our society is fixated on the idea that there is an "average person" and designs products and processes around these averages.

"There are, in fact, no average people. Human beings don't line up perfectly. [We] all have strengths and weaknesses. Even geniuses do." ~ Dr. Todd Rose

- <https://atlnets.org/underwood/weekly-updates/the-myth-of-the-average-student/>
- <https://medium.com/@harvardeducation/beyond-average-6e6223704e7e#.77r7tf8bw>

Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

In education, there is no average student, no one way to learn and show what you know and can do. That is why UDL (<http://www.cast.org/our-work/about-udl.html#.XzqB7uhKjIU>) applies the concept of flexible design to teaching, learning, and assessment. The basis of UDL rests on 3 basic constructs:

- Multiple means of representation – providing content to students in a variety of modes
- Multiple means of action and expression – providing a variety of ways for students to express themselves as they respond to content
- Multiple means of engagement – stimulating and motivating students by using a variety of ways to engage their interests, emotions, and gifts

2017 In 1907 Indiana legalized normalcy; in 2017 Indiana dismantled normalcy

On June 1, 2017, one of a few local Indianapolis grassroots efforts not associated with a university or national or local community organization was chosen to present during the national Critical Race Studies in Education Association Conference at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis. SAGE co-founders John Loflin and Merry Juerling made history when presenting, "In 1907 Indiana legalized normalcy and in 2017 Indiana dismantled normalcy."¹¹ The workshop bared the underbelly of Hoosier history, and the personalities and organizations which enabled white supremacy.

2020 The New Eugenics: Interventions used now on the "in need" instead of sterilization

If eugenics was an attempt to "perfect" humanity via and breeding and sterilizations, what interventions are used now instead of sterilization?

Our inability to accept people the way they are

Since historically it's the children of color and the working class poor who lack achievement, the gap implies (as it did in the 1920s) that those students unable to meet standards on standardized tests are deficient and depicted as lesser, or "in need."

This deficient, even "faulty" quality is reinforced and validated by today's educational response. Instead of sterilization, interventions are used: tutoring, longer school days, teacher incentives, more and constant testing, mentoring, a longer school year, computers, school uniforms, on-line courses, charters, and single genders schools and classes.

These activities are to make up for the child's deficiencies and "lesser-ness." Yet, doesn't the very presence of these "interventions" actually enable a sort of **neo-eugenics stigma** placed on some students as "lacking"? Was it not being unfit, this "lacking" that led to sterilizations?

"In fact, I would argue, NCLB is itself a 21st century representation of eugenicist pseudo-science in its use of standards-based, Cartesian, modernist representation of what (literally) counts as learning and how it can be measured. This measurement of learning is a distinctly Eugenicist idea used as a way to sort people. NCLB ratchets this approach up a notch by sorting schools, not just individuals."

~ Phil Smith, *Whatever happened to inclusion? The place of students with intellectual disabilities in education*

See John Harris Loflin's "A history of standardized Testing: The Hoosier connections" at <http://www.schoolsmatter.info/2013/04/past-and-present-eugenics-standardized.html>

2020 Models and theories of disability ¹²

Today, there are 4 broad models in the disability literature:

- 1) The medical model: this model views impairment as a problem located in an individual.
- 2) The human rights model: accords fundamental human rights to persons with disabilities.
- 3) The social model: makes a distinction between impairment (physical/mental/sensory) and disability (as the experience of social oppression).
- 4) The Critical Disability Studies model: questions the dualism between impairment and disability.

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1. *Disability, Schooling and the Artifacts of Colonialism* Kliever & Fitzgerald, 2001
 2. James W. Trent <https://www.amazon.com/Inventing-Feeble-Mind-Retardation-Medicine/dp/0520203577>
 3. Kantor, W. (1937). "Beginnings of sterilization in America: an interview with Dr. Harry C. Sharp, who performed the first operation nearly forty years ago." *Journal of Heredity*. 28(11):374-376.
 4. Stern, A. (2007) "We Cannot Make a Silk Purse Out of a Sow's Ear": Eugenics in the Hoosier Heartland *Indiana Magazine of History*. 103(1):3-38
 5. Bernadette Baker, The Hunt for Disability, *Teachers College Record*, 2002
 6. Roy Lowe *Schooling and Social Change*, 1997
 7. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4216267/>
 8. [Constructing Normalcy: The Bell Curve, the Novel and the Invention of the Disabled Body in the 19th Century](#)
 9. <http://vorcreatex.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/The-Hunt-for-Disability-The-New-Eugenics-and-the-Normalization-of-School-Children.pdf>
 10. <https://www.pharmalive.com/lilly-a-new-administrtrtion/>
 11. <http://vorcreatex.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/CRESA-Proposal-In-1907-Indiana-legalized-normalcy-in-2017-Indiana-dismantled-normalcy.pdf>.
 12. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK378951/>

Other disability history resources

The Oxford Handbook of Disability History, Rembis, et al. editors, 2018

A history if Disability, Henri-Jacques Stiker, 1999

Intellectual Disability: A Conceptual History, 1200-1900, McDonagh, et al. editors, 2018

The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability, Jasbir K. Puar, 2017