

media platforms, as well as all topics that are adversely discussed by the public, since metaphorically speaking, the public sphere is the voice of the intermediary discourses, uttering public opinions. Nevertheless, one has to bear in mind that 'the public' is comprised of heterogeneous individuals who participate in different intermediary discourses and with different interests. The public sphere, though not an institution, is institutionalised. While it may generate opinions, they are not free of power structures; and since subjects not only differ in opinions but more significantly in their intents and means of persuading others, one cannot possibly conclude that the outcome of a public debate equals 'communicative rationality'. Consequently, public opinions do not necessarily represent the majority, but the powerful. This will be of particular relevance in Chapter 5 when I explore the discourses surrounding autism. For now, however, I will focus on deviance.

Normality and Deviance

Perhaps stereotypes are inherently linked to normality and deviance, but especially those that tilt toward negativity and prejudices. As previously mentioned, autism stereotypes all allude to forms of deviance such as disability, extraordinary abilities, or even 'non-human' characteristics. In his book, Link uses statistics to establish what constitutes normality. For him the Gaussian distribution curve is a representation of what he calls *Normalfeld* (field of normality⁸) (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 44):

A field of normality homogenises and perpetuates a certain set of phenomena within a specialised or intermediary discourse, whereby these 'units of normality' become comparable among each other. (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 51, own translation)⁹

8 Again, no fixed translation exists for this term, thus I have provided my own suggestion.

9 Ein Normalfeld homogenisiert und kontiniert eine bestimmte Menge von Erscheinungen innerhalb des Spezial- oder Interdiskurses, wodurch diese Er-

A certain subset of phenomena is located within the same field where they can be arranged freely, e.g. along a gamut (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 51). This, of course, also resembles the spectrum which was introduced in 2013 to redefine autism and which has since become highly contested (cf. Chapter 6.3). Not all phenomena can be recorded as statistics, thus Gaussian distribution curves and other data may generate false security as well as a tendency towards normativity. Consequently, Link defines normality – on a more abstract level – as a cross-section of partial normalities produced by specialised discourses and united by the intermediary discourse. Subjects will then use this conglomerate to self-regulate (*Versuch über den Normalismus* 20). Here, Link differentiates two strategies by which society handles normality. *Protonormalismus* (protonormality, own translation) describes a narrow set of rules which define normality. It is generally considered normative, i.e. once a subject violates the rules, it becomes deviant and is consequently unable to return to being normal (Preusser 101–102). On the other hand, *flexibler Normalismus* (flexible normalism, own translation) establishes a broad normality which strives to be inclusive towards the deviant (102). Both forms of normality are ideal-typical and coexist (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 55–56), however, Rolf Parr states that modern society tends towards flexible normalism (Schlicht 87).

Because normality is established by discourses, it is also always time-bound (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 109). Ironically, the term ‘normality’ itself first emerged in connection with modernity (Preusser 101). Although one might be tempted to consider knowledge such as gravity to be normative, even normalities produced by specialised discourses must be understood as fleeting. Link gives the example of cholesterol:

Since the corresponding distribution of [cholesterol] values was probably already valid for the patriarch Abraham, it seems natural to grasp ‘normal’ on a biological basis as a supra-historical category and anthropological constant. However, this conclusion would be ... premature.

scheinungen als untereinander vergleichbare ‘Normaleinheiten’ konstituiert werden. (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 51)

For Abraham, the cholesterol value played no cultural role whatsoever, nor did any analogues, because data and statistics played no role in his culture. (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 36, own translation)¹⁰

The concept of normality is not just a product of modernity, it is also something that we cannot apply retrospectively, for the simple reason that it did not constitute any normality for society at that time, even if we perceive it to be universally true and thus indisputable. Because we are unable to escape our own understanding of reality, it naturally appears to be the most logical explanation. Moreover, by doing so we overrule the 'other' normality. This is similar to instances of people blaming crop failure or infertility on an angry god rather than meteorological or biological circumstances. Even though historians might nowadays have scientific explanations for a drought, these facts were not part of the people's reality back then and consequently did not influence their actions, intentions, or self-understanding. It is the fallacy of truth when in reality it is just a constructed meaning.

However, normalities not merely affect our perspective but those of the surrounding people, too. For example, historical figures such as Isaac Newton or Michelangelo are sometimes theorised to have been autistic. By reinterpreting them as such, we create another explanation for their behaviour. However, neither they nor their surroundings were aware of such a diagnosis, simply because it did not exist at that time and therefore could not have possibly been part of their normality.

On a small scale, retrospectively applied normalities, e.g. the label 'autistic', allow for a limited explanation of behaviour, but they also imply that people did not, in fact, act on their own free will. By labelling a historical figure or a fictional character – they are technically one and the

10 Da die entsprechende Werteverteilung [von Cholesterin] auch schon für den Patriarchen Abraham gültig gewesen sein dürfte, liegt es nahe, das Normale auf biologischer Basis als eine überhistorische Kategorie und anthropologische Konstante aufzufassen. Dieser Schluß wäre jedoch ... voreilig. Für Abraham spielte der Cholesterinwert kulturell eben keinerlei Rolle, ebenso wenig wie eventuelle Analoga, weil Verdattung und Statistik in seiner Kultur keinerlei Rolle spielten. (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 36)

same – their actions are subordinated to their diagnosis. Their behaviour and decisions are now ‘symptoms’, essentially turning them into personifications of a diagnosis. However, because neither the character (or person) nor their surroundings are aware of such a diagnosis, they will attribute the same behaviours to other causes. Put starkly, any interpretation that fails to account for their respective normalities and self-understanding, strips these characters of their free will and reduces their behaviour to something akin to instincts. Therefore, some explanations are not merely a ‘matter of opinion’, but they come at a cost.

Either way, retrospectively ‘diagnosing’ characters only allows for a subjectively better understanding of a very limited set of characteristics, while simultaneously blurring timelines and ideas, i.e. normalities. Discursive statements that are part of our ‘normality’ appear less fleeting to us because they shape our perspective of reality and can become self-sustaining. However, such definitions and criteria are anchored in space and time and may therefore become outdated in the future, too. Thus, ‘diagnosing’ characters can be very limiting when it comes to comprehensive studies of literature.

Indeed, the power ‘normality’ has on a society should not be underestimated. I have already stated that normality can be understood as a cross-section of specialised normalities. This cross-section, I believe, represents a public understanding of normality which is broadcasted in the media and thus serves individuals as a reference. Mostly, however, the public debates normality by negotiating deviance. In other words, aspects of living together pertain to a certain cultural normality which borders normativity and is opposed by deviant behaviour. Subsequently, especially within flexible normalism, the question arises of how much variance poses abnormality. Considering the Gaussian distribution curve, the safest and ‘most normal’ place is in the middle. Yet, any deviation can be, in Link’s words, ‘fun’ or ‘thrilling’ (*Versuch über den Normalismus* 44), thus a certain deviance is often perceived as exciting.

Bettina Gruber states that the modern subject first asserts itself as an individual through occasional transgressions of the boundaries of nor-

mality and by doing so attains the authenticity of its individual self. (Zeman 75, own translation)¹¹

While self-regulation and fun-/thrill-seeking remain subjective, scholars have also identified three ‘objective’ ways by which individuals are steered towards normality: “per repression (Marcuse), dressage (Behaviourism, Foucault) and normativity (Durkheim)” (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 407, own translation).¹² In other words, society is intentionally enforcing normality.

Establishing normality is obviously linked to power. This relationship becomes even clearer when Wolfgang Keckeisen’s theory of negotiating deviance is applied. His work on normality and deviance precedes Link’s theory on normality by nearly four decades. In it, Keckeisen examines the labelling approach which closes the gap between discourses and everyday communication. He, too, differentiates two forms of normality, resembling what Link called protonormality and flexible normalism. The aetiological paradigm¹³ does not question the existence of normality and deviance but the cause for abnormal behaviour. Keckeisen suggests that both science and our everyday thinking are indebted to this worldview, thus presupposing the existence of deviance and focusing on analysing the causes (35).¹⁴ Because the aetiological paradigm sees deviance as an ontological given, it sets strict boundaries for normality and

11 Bettina Gruber stellt fest, das sich das moderne Subjekt durch gelegentliche Überschreitungen der Normalitätsgrenzen als Individuum allererst zur Geltung bringt und in dieser Transgression die Authentizität seines individuellen Selbst erlangt. (Zeman 75)

12 “per Repression (Marcuse), Dressur (Behaviourismus, Foucault) und Normativität (Durkheim)” (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 407)

13 Originally called *ätiologisches Paradigma*.

14 “Das Grundproblem des ätiologischen Paradigmas, dem die vorherrschende Wissenschaft ebenso wie das Alltagsdenken immer noch verpflichtet sind, läßt sich in der Frage erfassen, welche *Bedingungen* einem vorfindlichen *Sachverhalt*, nämlich abweichendem Verhalten, ursächlich zuzurechnen seien. Das Merkmal, das den erklärungsbedürftigen Sachverhalt bestimmt, die Normwidrigkeit des Verhaltens, wird als ‘Gegebenheit’ den theoretischen und empirischen Bemühungen *logisch* vorausgesetzt.” (Keckeisen 24)

therefore resembles protonormality. However, these boundaries are not questioned in themselves. Meanwhile, the control paradigm (originally called *Kontrollparadigma*) defines deviance as a particular type of social relationship (35–36).¹⁵

Both the control paradigm and flexible normalism conceive normality as a social construct that can be renegotiated. However, while Link anchors normality within a field of normality, i.e. an (ideal) Gaussian distribution curve generated by a discourse, Keckeisen assumes that normality (and deviance) is established in everyday communication. According to him, ‘deviance’ is an attribute ascribed by others. Both, a person or their behaviour, can be normatively (re-)defined as deviant, thus also undermining the idea of deviance as an ontological status (Keckeisen 28).¹⁶

Here, Link and Keckeisen diverge. For Link, normality must be ontological, or else no statistical data could be collected. Keckeisen’s control paradigm, on the other hand, undermines the assumption that normality could be considered even roughly objective. In reality, both theories co-exist. For example, the medical discourse necessarily assumes ontological facts and thus an aetiological paradigm, whereas disability studies theorise that disability is a social construct. Here, two completely different assumptions about reality are made, which are in essence irreconcilable. Consequently, autism diagnoses remain disputed in terms of

15 “Ausgangspunkt aller Überlegungen, die sich am Kontrollparadigma ausrichten, ist die Feststellung, keinem Zustand oder Merkmal eines Individuums wohne die Eigenschaft der Abweichung inne, Abweichung bezeichne vielmehr als gesellschaftliche Kategorie die besondere Qualität einer sozialen Beziehung.” (Keckeisen 35–36)

16 “Dieses Paradigma läßt Abweichung nicht als Eigenschaft erscheinen, die Personen bzw. ihren Entäußerungen in wie immer vorzustellender Weise innewohnt, ihnen in diesem gleichsam ontologischen Sinn eigen ist. Devianz wird vielmehr als ein gesellschaftliches Verhältnis, als *soziale Beziehung* aufgefaßt. Diese hat zum Inhalt die *Zuschreibung* einer normativ bestimmten Qualität, die einer Person bzw. ihrem Verhalten durch andere widerfährt und sie (bzw. das Verhalten) auf diesem Wege als abweichend definiert. Devianz erscheint durch sinnhaft strukturierte Interaktion konstituiert. Jeder ‘ontologische’ Status wird ihr abgesprochen.” (Keckeisen 28)

normality. So far, no biological markers have been found and while diagnostic criteria exist, it is a matter of negotiation whether these criteria are sufficient for a diagnosis, i.e. if the symptomology fits the criteria (see also Chapter 6.4, Masking and Camouflaging). In other words, and rather oversimplified, someone without an autism diagnosis is technically normal since they are not part of these statistics (yet).¹⁷ For Keckeisen, on the other hand, deviance can be established as soon as the subject enters into communication with someone else and sans any ontological indications. Here, deviance is not a question of statistical deviation, but of power. Keckeisen suggests that whenever the interpretations of 'what happened' contradict each other, they are negotiated in terms of *accusation* and *justification*. Individuals might even bargain and exchange offers and counter-offers, a metaphor that can also be applied to the exchange between prosecution and defence (40).¹⁸

Keckeisen's emphasis on controversial interpretations stresses the fact that ultimately one explanation will dominate all others; and since it is based on power rather than ontological entities or universal norms, these judgements can never be 'true' or 'false' (48). Instead, the inferior subject has to accept the accusation as reality. Consequently, power structures that also dominate public opinions are more imminent in Keckeisen's definition, whereas Link's theory suggests a certain extent of objectivity created by experts that generate partial normalities in specialised discourses. These theories also co-exist within the autism discourse, as I will show in Chapter 5.3. Diagnostic criteria for autism are generated by a specialised discourse and thus create a partial normality; however, the neurodiversity movement, as well as autism

17 If 'normal' is normatively derived from the statistically higher probability of being non-autistic versus being autistic.

18 "Unter dem Gesichtspunkt von Macht stellt sich die Frage, wie *kontroverse* Interpretationen dessen, 'was geschehen ist' oder 'was der Fall ist', in den praktischen Entscheidungsprozeß eingehen. Dessen Medium ist eine Verhandlung (negotiation, bargaining), der Austausch von Behauptungen und Deutungen, von Angebot und Gegenangebot oder, spezifischer, von Anschuldigung und Rechtfertigung." (Keckeisen 95, original highlighting)

activists, are renegotiating these criteria, as well as challenging the concept of ‘normal’ as opposed to ‘autistic’.

In his study, Keckeisen is mostly concerned with criminal behaviour, which subsequently impacts his choice of words, as his terminology is borrowed from court hearings. Indeed, according to Keckeisen, the jurisdictional system is the ultimate embodiment of this form of negotiating deviance (62). He states that claiming the violation of a social norm will always result in accusation (‘charge’) and justification (‘account’) (45–46). If the justification fails, deviance is established, and the accusation is accepted as ‘a fact’. This, of course, is completely arbitrary, in the sense that the powerful can define deviant behaviour (40). However, although Keckeisen’s legal terminology at times sounds Kafkaesque, any aspect of our living together is negotiated, with only the most significant ‘violations’ being tried in court. For example, a fight between spouses over who forgot to take out the trash can be apprehended in terms of accusation and justification, too, but the outcome will likely only affect the relationship between these two individuals. In Kafka’s *The Trial*, Josef K. is accused of and prosecuted for something that he does not understand, nor is he able to justify himself, since he is unaware of the rules by which his deviance is determined. Keckeisen therefore stresses that rationality stems from the extent to which an agent adapts their utterances to the situation as he understands it (100).¹⁹ The reader considers K. rational for the most part. Yet the superior party, in this case the court, denies this rationality. Similarly, a schizophrenic may act according to their perception of reality but will be overruled by the superior majority who does not share their hallucinations. Here, ‘truth’ is established by power. One must thus bear in mind that power imbalances can be deliberately created and used to establish deviance through othering. Interestingly, this is usually not reflected in the final judgment, i.e. legal experts will judge a lay-person in a courtroom, independently of whether this person considers themselves guilty or not. According to Keckeisen, it is therefore not the actual

19 “Wenn der Akteur seine sprachlichen und nichtsprachlichen Äußerungen an der Situation, wie er sie versteht, orientiert, so sind sie rational in dem Maße, in dem sie der sozialen Situation adäquat sind.” (Keckeisen 100)

change of perspective but the imputation of one, since it ultimately has to be plausible to third parties (e.g. the court) (58).²⁰

Here, the power of specialised discourses becomes apparent. Because their participants are usually considered experts, they will join negotiations that pertain to their field of expertise with an advantage in credibility. Moreover, the power of definition lies with the superior, thus statements by specialised discourses are usually considered normative for the intermediary discourse. Keckeisen emphasises the fact that norms, particularly legal norms, are generally declared by the powerful and enforced with the help of sanctions. The interests and values of one group therefore gain dominance over others (109–110).²¹ Thus, not even the law is free of power structures.

Of course, this assumes a status quo in which norms and laws, including a jurisdictional system, already exist, thus all participants have previously been institutionalised by culture. However, even if legal systems in democracies appear to be ‘the will of the people’, it is in fact the ‘will of the powerful’ and the normality society is trying to enforce was originally created by the powerful, too. On a related note, I believe that while the public cannot overrule statements made by specialised discourses as such, they may choose to ignore the ‘facts’, essentially muzzling the experts.

20 “Der Kern der Sache ist ... nicht das Gelingen des Perspektivwechsels, sondern dessen *Unterstellung*. Tatsächlich ist es ... faktisch nicht so sehr von Bedeutung, daß der Proband seine Intentionen in den Interpretationen der ihn Kontrollierenden wiedererkennt, als vielmehr, daß diese Interpretationen Dritten (z.B. Kollegen, Vorgesetzten oder Gerichten) plausibel sind.” (Keckeisen 58, original highlighting)

21 “Demnach gehören gesamtgesellschaftliche Normen, insbesondere Rechtsnormen, als Normen mit allgemeinem Geltungsanspruch genuin nicht der Gesamtgesellschaft zu, sondern werden von den Gruppen, die mächtig genug sind, zu allgemein gültigen erklärt und mit Hilfe eines Sanktionsapparats durchgesetzt. Im Inhalt von Gesetzen gewinnen dieser Auffassung zufolge die ‘Werte’ (Moral, Interessen, Einstellungen) einer Gruppe Dominanz über diejenigen der unterlegenen Gruppierungen.” (Keckeisen 109–10)

Normality can be understood as a complex but fleeting construct of reintegrated specialised normalities. Because it influences our reality, it cannot be retrospectively applied to other societies. However, some ‘anthropological constants’ might be considered supra-historical. Attributing a person’s or character’s behaviour to such biological factors will overrule the respective normality, but only generate a very limited explanation, usually at the cost of free will.

Labelling

Wherever there is ‘normality’, there is also deviance. Yet, while high cholesterol may cause health issues, it does not usually result in social marginalisation, since it is mostly private and thus invisible. On the other hand, a mere rumour can result in social stigmatisation, a concept first coined by Erving Goffman: If a person possesses an attribute that makes them fall out of an expected social category in an undesirable way, this attribute is called a stigma (11). Even labels, including ‘disabled’, ‘gifted’, ‘robotic’, or indeed ‘autistic’, can signify such an attribute and thus deviance. While it is important to bear in mind that stigmata are arbitrary in the sense that they, too, are linked to power, labels can have very real consequences.

According to Goffman, there are three types of stigma; bodily marks, e.g. physical disabilities, ‘blemishes of character’, including a ‘weak will’, dishonesty or mental disorder, and what he calls ‘tribal stigma’, referring to race, nation, or religion. The latter he describes as a “stigma that can be transmitted through lineages and equally contaminate all members of a family” (12). Apart from his choice of words, Goffman’s theory of stigma is still widely accepted. I thus suggest differentiating physical, mental, and class-related stigmata.

I also suggest differentiating visible and invisible deviance. Bodily marks are externally visible and may lead to instant stigmatisation. Here, ‘obvious’ ontological aspects are linked to assumptions made about an individual (see Chapter 3, Stereotypes). Mental stigmata, on the other hand, are per Keckeisen’s definition negotiated and thus