

Normality and Deviance

Most people have a good understanding of what is considered ‘normal’, even though they would struggle to establish rules for it. While we are quick to recognise derivations, everything else is processed subconsciously. One aspect that links together all stereotypical assumptions about autism, as identified in the previous chapter, is deviance. There is something different about them, if only because they were labelled autistic – by the author, the reader, the public – which consequently makes readers biased. They now expect this character to act in a way that justifies the label, and they are likely to find it because of the confirmation bias. This way, autism portrayals may turn into self-fulfilling prophecies.

Discourses of the Public

In 1962, Jürgen Habermas published his book *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere). In it, he coined the term ‘Öffentlichkeit’ (‘public sphere’), a highly contested thesis that nevertheless provides a much-needed tool to deal with ‘the public opinion’. So far, I used the terms public, public stereotypes, and public opinion without giving a definition of ‘public’. “[T]he public sphere is constituted wherever and whenever any matter of living together with difference is debated” (Dahlberg 112). However, it is not the sum total of everyday communication but rather the social space that is created by assuming that ‘the public’ exists (Mein 14). Here, the

consistent usage of the term public is misleading; suggesting that it is a unified entity when it is in fact a signifier without a signified:

When talking of *the* public sphere, Habermas is not talking about a homogenous, specific public, but about the whole array of complex networks of multiple and overlapping publics constituted through the critical communication of individuals, groups, associations, social movements, journalistic enterprises, and other civic institutions. (Dahlberg 112, original highlighting)

In other words, the public sphere is an overlapping array of discourses that negotiate our living together; a kaleidoscope of opinions, interests, and differences that remain separate in themselves.

The public sphere cannot be conceived as an institution and certainly not as an organization. It is not even a framework of norms with differentiated competences and roles, membership regulations, and so on. Just as little does it represent a system; although it permits one to draw internal boundaries, outwardly it is characterized by open, permeable, and shifting horizons. The public sphere can best be described as a network for communicating information and points of view (i.e., opinions expressing affirmative or negative attitudes); the streams of communication are, in the process, filtered and synthesized in such a way that they coalesce into bundles of topically specified *public* opinions. (Habermas 360, original highlighting)

By implication, public opinions can form without actually unifying the public sphere. Instead, discourses may move into or out of the spotlight, i.e. their statements may be broadcasted or remain unheard, in the sense that they do or do not participate in the formation of public opinions (Mein 13). While knowledge and opinions are thus closely linked, they are not congruent. Rather, public opinions are the result of debated knowledge, yet an individual may pick up on this stance without being aware of any controversies, simply rendering it into a stereotype or prejudice. Consequently, private stereotypes may revolve around public opinions, and public opinions are a strong indicator for public stereotypes since

once a stereotype becomes public, they are debated publicly, which in turn generates public opinions, upon which subjects may act and thus alter or retain (public) stereotypes. Public stereotypes are thus a good indicator of society's attitude towards certain concepts or classes of people. The autism stereotypes that I have previously identified can be considered public because they are widespread enough to have manifested in novels. However, the exact outline of these stereotypes will vary, for each individual but also for each portrayal.

Literary scholar Jürgen Link considers normality a modern dispositive, which is established via discourses and poses a self-regulating factor for society. It is linked but not congruent with Habermas's theory of the public sphere as an array of discourses that negotiate our living together. According to Habermas, but heavily contested, public opinions form based on "communicative rationality":

Such rationality, also referred to as rational-critical discourse or argumentation, is where participation is coordinated through acts of reaching understanding, rather than through egocentric calculations of success. (Dahlberg 111)

Consequently, a subject would form their opinion after equally evaluating all knowledge. Critics, however, argue that a subject's rationality stems from its situatedness within a discourse (Dahlberg 124–25), or even that rationality is completely overruled by power (114). In other words, the rationality of the public sphere may be as idealistic as democracy itself and "[f]alse consensus may arise from explicit coercion, domination, and exclusion" (126). Public opinions may therefore simply be the victory of the powerful, since, as Richard Rorty puts it, reason is "simply ... the process of reaching agreement by persuasion" (120). Since I have already established that knowledge is linked to power, one may equally assume that stereotypes are linked to power, too, and consequently spread by similar means as consensuses. Put starkly, what is widely accepted, is likely grounded in power. Thus, power generates normality.

Link's theory distinguishes three forms of discourse, based on Michel Pêcheux's discourse analysis: *Spezialdiskurs* (specialised discourse), *Elementardiskurs* (elementary discourse), and *Interdiskurs* (intermediary discourse).¹

Specialised discourses are characterised by a maximum of imminent consistency and strict closure against external and non-related discourses. Scientific discourses are a typical example. Ideally, they tend towards unambiguous denotation, eliminating all ambiguities and connotations. (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 42, own translation)²

This type of discourse is usually scientific in nature and its participants are considered experts. Consequently, laypeople cannot participate in specialised discourses. Quite often, these discourses distinguish themselves not only by their intention of producing 'universally valid' definitions but also by distinct terminologies, e.g. medical or technical (Mein 16–17). However, statements made by specialised discourses, i.e. knowledge items, may still change, e.g. through 'revolutionary' new insights. Thus, semantic approaches to terminology may be misleading as they forgo the specific statement within which a term was used, failing to acknowledge their historicity.

The elementary discourse is located opposite of specialised discourses.

1 Since no fixed translation exists, I have provided my own. It must be noted that the term 'interdiscourse' is ambivalent, thus I opted for the bulky 'intermediary discourse'.

2 **Spezialdiskurse** zeichnen sich durch ein Maximum an immanenter Konsistenz und durch strikte Abschließung gegen arbeitsteilig externes Diskursmaterial aus. Das typische Beispiel sind die wissenschaftlichen Diskurse. Sie tendieren idealtypisch zur eindeutigen Denotation unter Ausschaltung aller Mehrdeutigkeiten und Konnotationen. (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 42, original highlighting)

Within the elementary discourse, so-called anthropological constants (such as love, enmity, struggle and death) are combined with dominant interdiscursive complexes and thus actualised and historicised. (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 43, own translation)³

As such the elementary discourse is universal, and everybody participates. In fact, Link considers it to be everyday knowledge (“Kulturwissenschaftliche Orientierung” 72). I have referred to these ‘constants’ as fundamental ideas that change over time but are much less fleeting than contemporary concepts. However, because this discourse is at the roots of our society, it cannot be clearly distinguished from the intermediary discourse which generates public knowledge. In fact, it is the intermediary discourse’s main function to reintegrate expert knowledge generated by specialised discourses, generalising it along the way and adapting it to culture (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 42).

If specialised discourses aim at unambiguity by attempting to restrict connotations and make denotation dominant, the intermediary discourse aims at ambiguity by expanding denotations towards rich connotations, thus enabling reciprocal bridging and cross-sections. (Mein 17–18, own translation)⁴

The intermediary discourse is technically an array of discourses, similar to how the public sphere is a network of communication:

Intermediary discourses are distinct discourses that are constituted on the basis of interdiscursive material and serve the (always highly par-

- 3 Im Elementardiskurs werden sogenannte anthropologischen Konstanten (wie Liebe, Feindschaft, Kampf und Tod) mit dominanten interdiskursiven Komplexen kombiniert und dadurch aktualisiert und historisiert. (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 43)
- 4 Wenn also Spezialdiskurse auf Eindeutigkeit zielen, indem sie versuchen, Konnotationen einzuschränken und Denotation herrschend zu machen, so zielt der Interdiskurs genau umgekehrt auf Mehrdeutigkeit, indem Denotationen auf reiche Konnotationen hin erweitert und erst dadurch interferierende Brückenschläge und Querschnittsformen möglich werden. (Mein 17–18)

tial and symbolic) reintegration of culture and subjects. (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 43, own translation, original highlighting)⁵

Because expert knowledge is only partially reintegrated, the intermediary discourse is not comprised of the totality of all statements generated by the specialised discourses. Present-day knowledge has become too vast to be simply conglomerated (Link, "Kulturwissenschaftliche Orientierung" 73). Instead, society relies on the intermediary discourse(s) to reduce specialised knowledge to public knowledge. Thus, while specialised discourses strive towards selective definitions, the intermediary discourse will take these definitions, generalise them and weave them into a larger net of cross-references (Link, "Sprache, Diskurs, Interdiskurs und Literatur" 122). Here, one could argue that the intermediary discourses also create stereotypes. However, I believe that stereotypes are a form of abbreviated knowledge that exists across all discourses. Again, stereotypes can be considered automated responses. Therefore, while experts will hold different stereotypes of autism than laypeople, they will both engage in simplifying their surroundings. Interestingly, however, the public sphere debates our living together mostly based on conflicting statements within the intermediary discourse rather than knowledge produced by specialised ones (124).

Link positions the public in relation to 'discursive events' generated by the intermediary discourses ("Sprache, Diskurs, Interdiskurs und Literatur" 123–124). By definition, a discursive event is a debate around one topic with both a political and medial impact that subsequently changes the course of other discourses (Jäger and Maier 124). Consequently, the public sphere is not congruent with the intermediary discourse. Rather, it is generated by the process of forming public opinions. For Link, the public sphere is thus mostly comprised of journalistic discourses that generate political opinions (Link, "Sprache, Diskurs, Interdiskurs und

5 Als **Interdiskurse** seien dann besondere Diskurse bezeichnet, die auf der Basis des interdiskursiven Materials konstituiert werden und der (immer höchst partiellen und symbolischen) Reintegration der Kultur und der Subjekte dienen. (Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus* 43)

Literatur" 124), whereas the intermediary discourses also include topics such as religion, philosophy, history, education, art, literature, and science (123). Habermas positioned his public sphere against a political backdrop as well. However, as opposed to Link, he did not focus on the media. Arguably, topics such as religion, philosophy, education, or science can be politicised, too; because they are woven into the fundaments of our culture, they also pertain to questions of our living together. Even if these topics have no obvious or unified political agenda, they may result in discursive events. However, I believe that conceptualising 'public opinions' as something that manifests itself within the media, is indeed helpful to my cause. For example, a journalist of a renowned newspaper publishing an article about novels that feature autism portrayals yields some power over the public opinion and can subsequently bias people towards (re-)interpreting characters as autistic. What is less obvious in such a case is the fact that the journalist themselves likely reiterated their privately held stereotypes.

Similar to the public sphere, literature plays an important role in giving the intermediary discourse a voice. Link, a literary critic himself, stated the following: "Literature⁶ is the 'socially institutionalised processing of the intermediary discourse' while preserving and artificially heightening its ambivalences" (Mein 19, own translation)⁷. In a weird twist, literature thus forms its own specialised discourse (19), subjectifying knowledge. However, literature is also of relevance when exploring public opinions, as well as society's understanding of certain concepts.

Following Link, I suggest that the public sphere generally manifests itself within the media discourses, including mass media and media politics, while simultaneously being created by them. Since literature reflects on the intermediary discourse and impacts public opinion, I may assume a partial overlap of mass media and literature. However, I will also include non-journalistic debates, such as those occurring on social

⁶ The totality of written works produced by culture, including newspapers.

⁷ Literatur ist die 'gesellschaftlich institutionalisierte Verarbeitung des Interdiskurses' unter Bewahrung und künstlicher Steigerung seiner Ambivalenzen. (Mein 19)

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 kontinuiert eine bestimmte Menge von Erscheinungen innerhalb des Spezial- oder Interdiskurses, wodurch diese Er-