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# Contributions of Disability Studies and Childhood Studies to Understanding the Construction of “Normality” and “Disability” in Day-Care Settings

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In this paper<sup>1</sup>, normality and disability are viewed as constructed phenomena, meaning that neither concept is viewed as pre-given or pre-determined, but rather as part of social processes in day-care settings. Constructions of normality and disability are questioned in terms of what could, or should, be considered a normal child or a disabled child.

As part of my PhD study (Franck 2014) I interviewed several staff members who reflected on normality and deviance among day-care children. The issue of normality can create a dilemma for day-care staff since they should both embrace diversity and ensure equal opportunities within the educational system. A day-care staff member’s statement illustrates this: “But what – I ask myself this question every day – what is normal then? Are we supposed to make like, like, ideal children who are all alike?” Dilemmas on how to understand children are also apparent in Norwegian national documents. Day-care staff members are in some ways torn. On the one hand they face increased demand to document and evaluate children’s development, skills, and abilities as a means to ensure equality in future school-outcomes. On the other hand, day-care centres need to maintain focus on the intrinsic value of

childhood and celebrate diversity among children (Franck 2014). Exploring ways of understanding constructions of normality and disability thus intends to shed light on possible approaches for understanding central practices and perspectives operating within the day-care setting.

In an attempt to outline contributions from Disability studies and Childhood studies I will in this paper delimit and direct focus towards a few key areas in each respective academic field. Firstly this paper outlines a couple of well-established perspectives within Childhood studies regarding children as competent actors and criticizing a notion of a normal developing child. I will illustrate how discussions on these matters contribute to further understanding of constructions of normality in day-care settings. Thereafter I will comment on childhood studies contribution to understanding constructions of disability in terms of including disabled children’s voices in research, but also how this may trouble the notion of the competent child.

The second part of this paper points to central elements within the field of Disability studies and connects these to the day-care setting. First, I illustrate how perspectives from the social model of disability contribute with a focus on disabling barriers as a way

to understand constructions of disability in day-care settings. Next, I explore how a post-structural inspired perspective directs attention towards the notion of impairment; revealing ways of exploring constructions of impairment in the day-care setting. Next I will comment briefly on how Disability studies have engaged with the concept of normality, and what this may contribute with in relation to the day-care field.

Bringing these fields together is a daunting task, however they have several commonalities and at the end of this paper I will outline a few central points that could inspire further discussions.

Before starting I wish to apologize for the manner in which complex issues have been simplified, and how certain elements of interest may have been neglected. Despite this, this paper could serve as an introduction to complex issues within quite large and multifaceted academic fields.

## Childhood studies and constructions of “normality”

Childhood studies was established as an interdisciplinary field in the early 1980s (Jenks 1982; James and Prout 1997; James, Jenks and Prout 1998). It could be called a counter-paradigm as it challenged dominant understandings of children and childhood. Scholars in the field argued against traditional developmental psychology and definitions of children and childhood as natural and universal phenomena. Childhood studies perceives children and childhood as socially constructed, emphasizing how the character, interpretations, and practices of childhood varies significantly in history and between cultures (James and Prout 1997; James and James 2004).

## Criticizing “normality” perceived as normal development

The field in particular criticized the notion of a normally developing child as established within traditional developmental psychology (Jenks 1992; Prout 2005). Andre Turmel (2008) illustrates how the notion of a normally developing child was constructed in history by the emergence of medicine, psychology, and statistics. Others, such as Allison James (2004) criticized the manner in which the unique development of a child becomes measured against that of a generalized child. Influenced by the work of Michel Foucault (1982, 1999) and Nicolas Rose (1990), one could argue that age and developmental standards are ways to govern children’s diversity. Age, for instance, is a key conceptual device that makes it possible to establish norms and standards despite the enormous variations among children (Rose 1990). A focus on children and childhood as socially constructed provides a critical stance from which to challenge and deconstruct established norms and standards for what is considered a “normal child” and a “normal childhood.”

The notion of ‘normal development’ in terms of ages and stages and developmental milestones has been criticized from several academic disciplines, including psychology itself (cf. Burman 1994; Henriques et al. 1998; Burman 2012). Nevertheless, developmentalism still has a strong position within common sense thinking and the conceptualization of children and childhood in day-care settings (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence 1999). A quite typical way of describing children’s conduct is for example: “The play that is evolving now is the type of play that should perhaps have been there a year ago.” (day-care staff member, personal communication, in Franck 2014). In Norway and beyond children are in the day-care set-

ting monitored and evaluated in terms of their development and capabilities. There is a widespread use of tests and mapping devices from which day-care staff members assess and document children's normal development (Østrem et al. 2009; Kunnskapsdepartementet 2011), which further illustrates how children are compared, ranked, and documented in regards to standards of normality.

### **Contribution to understanding “-normality” in day-care settings**

The critical perspective outlined above redirects attention away from ways of discovering children's abilities or disabilities and towards examining norms and values on which evaluations are based on. As children and childhood are perceived as socially constructed, the research directs attention to the practices and processes in which these constructions take place. Challenging the notion of a normally developing child can stimulate an exploration of assumptions and constructions of normality in the day-care setting (cf. Nilsen 2003; Franck 2014) as well as an exploration of the norms, values, and taken-for-granted understandings within the institutional context of the day-care.

In the Nordic countries, researchers such as Anne Trine Kjørholt (2004, 2005), Randi Dyblie Nilsen (2000, 2008), Eva Gulløv (2012), Ann-Mari Markström (2005, 2009), Maarit Alasuutari and Karila (2010), Alasuutari and Markström (2011) (to mention but a few) have examined how the normative day-care child is produced and reproduced within the day-care setting. For instance Alasuutari and Markström (2011) examined how certain expectations and norms are reproduced and constructed in parent-teacher conferences in day-cares. Their study illustrates how an institutional order and generational practice produces and enables a

particular kind of child and normality in children. Light is shed on how children are assessed against norms and values related to peer-relations, independence, but also conformity to adult guidance. Other scholars such as Thomas Ellegaard (2004) and Jan Kampmann (2004) point out that in Nordic day-care centres, children are expected to be self-governed, independent, and competent. Their writings point to how the notion of competence is not unproblematic, which is a central discussion within Childhood studies.

### **Discussing “normality” perceived as competent subjects**

Childhood studies scholars have argued for a perspective that acknowledges children as competent subjects with agency, in contrast to future-oriented perspectives that render children incompetent, passive, vulnerable, and dependent (James and Prout 1997). Viewing children as competent has given possibilities for new ways of understanding children and it has also inspired scholars to include children's own voices and perspectives in research.

However, portraying children as competent autonomous subjects also implies certain limitations and a particular way of understanding children and childhood (Brembeck, Johansson and Kampmann 2004; Vandenbroeck and Bie 2006; Gilliam, Bundgaard and Gulløv 2007). The emphasis on autonomy, competence, and independence can be seen as indicating a valorization of independence over interdependence and competence over incompetence. As pointed out by Nick Lee (1999), bringing children into sociological focus in their own right has afforded children characteristics that were previously assumed to be exclusive to adults, thus preserving “the privilege of the complete and the mature over the incom-

plete and immature” (Lee 1999: 458). Following, discussions within Childhood studies have come to include and emphasize fluidity and shifting positions of competence. Anne Trine Kjørholt (2005), among others, has argued for a relational perspective as both children and adults move between different and shifting positions of dependency and independence, competence and incompetence in different contexts.

### **Contributions to understanding “normality” in day-care settings**

Questioning the notion of a competent child may contribute and encourage an understanding of children and adults that includes an awareness of shifting relations and positions. This enables exploration of the fluidity and contextual aspects of abilities and competences (and norms for evaluating such abilities and competences). Emphasizing the relational and contextual nature of competences and abilities may provide further understanding of how “normality” in the day-care setting is constructed in specific contexts and in relation to negotiable and shifting positions of in/competence and in/abilities. A critical perspective and discussion within Childhood studies and beyond can as such redirect the focus of inquiry away from determining children’s competences, and toward a focus on social interaction and context.

Such critical perspectives challenge the common assumption underlying evaluations of children’s normal development that individuals have inherent skills that we can objectively measure. Discussions by authors such as Sirrka Komulainen (2005) question how communication can be viewed as a skill. In particular, how it is treated as a skill that can be measured according to developmental milestones? What about interaction and context in which the communication oc-

curs? Geographer Louis Holt also questions how learning is perceived as individual development and not a social dialogue (2004a).

Research conducted with disabled children may further ignite discussions regarding competence, skills, and abilities. I will elaborate on this in the next section commenting on how Childhood studies offers perspectives for understanding constructions of disability in the day-care setting.

### **Childhood studies and constructions of “disability”**

In an attempt to outline contributions from Childhood studies in regards to constructions of disability, I found a striking absence regarding disability in Childhood studies literature. The aforementioned critical stance towards traditional developmental psychology does however also focus on the norms and values against which some children become defined as lagging behind, deficient, and lacking. Nevertheless, “disability” is a somewhat neglected area in Childhood studies, and research on disabled children is far too seldom published within mainstream Childhood studies (Stalker et al. 2012).

Despite the neglect to theorize and include disabled children, Childhood studies’ influence on other academic fields can be regarded as an important contribution towards understanding disability. A strong emphasis on children’s voices and everyday experiences has encouraged research from other fields to include voices and perspectives of disabled children. In this regard, Childhood studies and Disability studies has been brought together by scholars such as Daniel Goodley and Katherine Runswick-Cole (2010, 2013), John Davis and Nick Watson (2000, 2002) (to mention a few).

In terms of constructing disability in the day-care setting, a study that included chil-

dren's perspectives was done by Borgunn Ytterhus (2002). She explored how day-care children categorize differences by including perspectives from both what she calls "different children" and "most children." Her study shows how children construct their own set of categories and further how these categories are not ascribed to particular individuals – rather children could wander between categories from one situation to another. In some way, this way of categorizing resembles the previous mentioned discussion on competence as relational and varying depending on context.

As mentioned above, studies with disabled children have in some instances further ignited discussions of competence. The limitations and dilemmas related to children as competent beings become especially relevant when research includes disabled children's voices. As pointed out by Kay Tisdall (2012) and Sirkka Komulainen (2007), a voice commonly implies the property of a rational, competent individual, capable of speaking for herself or himself. The concept of voices could be understood as comprehensible verbal utterances, and as such the concept of children's voices risks excluding children who communicate little or not at all through speech (Komulainen in Tisdall 2012). Further, Tisdall (2012) illustrates how children's rights to be heard in other areas such as family law depend on their ability to articulate themselves consistently, clear, and definite. As such, not every child is considered competent and not all children's voices are acknowledged. This brings into question if the very goal to establish children as competent actually excludes some children who do not live up to expectations of competence. Perhaps defining children as having the presumed properties of adults (as competent, independent) is not the best solution for acknowledging children. Instead of

thinking in such binary terms as people being competent or incompetent, one should perhaps recognize that these are not individual properties or characteristics located within an individual, but rather distributed between people and dependent on relations and situations.

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Childhood studies has as such both contributed with a perspective that encourages research that includes disabled children's voices, and so facilitated new ways of understanding "disability" in the day-care setting as constructed by children. At the same time, including disabled children's voices has heightened awareness around ideas of children (and others) being identified as competent or in-competent. These issues can also be connected to discussions within Disability studies on notions of abilities and disabilities. While I will comment on this connection, I will first introduce a few other influential perspectives within Disability studies.

## **Disability studies and constructions of "disability"**

Disability studies were also established as a counter-movement to previous dominant understandings. From the 1970s and early 80s intellectual and political groups challenged the then dominant medical definition of disability as an individual's biological condition, often portrayed as an individual tragedy (Shakespeare 2006). Academics within Disability studies redirected focus to structures and social barriers of society

(e.g. Oliver 1990). There are several branches or models within the field of disability studies; however one of the more influential has been the social model of disability (Oliver 1990). In particular the conceptual divide between disability and impairment has been effective as a political project that allowed for important issues to be addressed (Shakespeare 2006; Barnes and Mercer 2010). These concepts were divided and defined as:

- Disability: social barriers and oppression of people with impairments
- Impairment: functional limitation within the individual caused by physical, mental, or sensory impairment.

This conceptual divide made it possible to explore disability as a social construction with a focus on social barriers and oppression of people with impairments. What is known as the Nordic or relational model of disability made a similar shift, and defined disability as a gap or mismatch between an individual's abilities and demands set by society and the environment (Tøssebro 2004).

### Contribution to understanding "disability" in day-care setting

In regards to constructions of disability within the day-care setting, these aforementioned models or perspectives focus on day-care institutions' structural barriers and discriminant factors. In particular:

1: Material and structural barriers. For example a day-care centre only accessible by stairs would be disabling for a child in wheel-chair. In Norwegian legislations such a focus has led to demands of universal access in day-care institutions (Framework Plan for Kindergartens 2011).

2: Social barriers. Problems faced by disabled children are not necessarily produced by their impairment, but rather they are the "outcomes of social relations, cultural representations and the behaviour of adults" (Shakespeare and Watson 1998: 22).

Scholars such as Mark Priestley (1998), and Tom Shakespeare and Nick Watson (1998) have been forerunners in challenging views of disabled children as pathetic, invalid, dependent, and incapable. They have also shed light on how normalizing practices may reproduce negative images of disabled children. As such, Disability studies provides a perspective for understanding how disability becomes constructed by society and social relations. Together with political movements, these perspectives have had an impact on legislations and rights for disabled people in many countries.

However, the conceptual divide between disability and impairment left the issue of impairment un-theorized as a biological given. Within the previous conceptual divide, social constructions of disability became a construct on top of a taken-for-granted and individualized notion of impairment.

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In policies and practices this becomes evident – rights of and possibilities for disabled people are still tied to medical and psychological diagnoses, which indicates that the problem of disability is within the body or mind of an individual. As demonstrated by Dan Goodley and Katherine Runswick-Cole (2011), social policy in England still relies on definitions of special educational needs that locate a deficit or problem within a child. In

a similar manner, Norwegian policy refers to special educational needs for children below school age in regards to the individual child's presumed normal development and skills compared to other children the same age. As such it is still the individual child who is seen as deficit, lacking, or flawed in some way. And as mentioned, the day-care is seen as a good place for discovering these presumed deficiencies and flaws (Mørland 2008; St.Meld.41 2008–2009).

In sum, the increased attention towards society's discriminating structures has on the one hand shed light on structural, material, and social barriers for inclusion, but it has *not* illuminated how some differences and variations among children end up being perceived and defined as deviant, deficient, or a biological flaw. I will now turn to post-structural inspired perspectives within Disability studies as a way to further understand constructions of disability *and* impairment.

## Disability studies and constructions of impairment

A post-structural perspective defines impairment as a social and discursive construction (Hughes and Paterson 1997; Goodley 2010), thus re-framing the medical conceptualization of impairment as a biological given. As stated by Dan Goodley: "impairment is social not the product of isolated individual pathologies" (2001: 225). The words we use and discourses we deploy to represent impairment are socially and culturally determined (Shakespeare and Watson 2001). Discourse is a key theoretical concept in this regard, which can be described as a system of representation that defines what is accepted as knowledge and what makes sense to say and do in relation to a specific topic (Hall 2001). Defining im-

pairment as a discursive product does not negate the existence of materiality or body, however, it implies that we cannot represent it neutrally. The language, words, and concepts we use to represent and understand impairment are part of discourses, and construct what we set out to describe. There is no neutral description of impairment – our understanding and representations always include historical, political, and cultural elements. In other words, with a post-structural perspective there is an attempt to overcome the commonly upheld distinction between the social and the biological, or the nature-culture divide, as the social and the biological are perceived as fused.

Recognizing that impairment cannot be neutrally described makes it possible to critically examine social representations of impairments and to critically question and deconstruct medical and psychiatric or psychological labels and diagnoses. This is all the more important given the rise in numbers of impairment labels in childhood. ADHD is for instance a diagnose surrounded by heated debates (e.g. Timimi 2004, 2005; Graham 2008), and some have also questioned whether Asperger syndrome constitutes an actual impairment and disorder as opposed to a neurological difference (Molloy and Vasil 2002). Hence, questions are raised not about whether differences exist, but rather about how differences among people – when labelled – are imbued with meanings and values. And following, on what basis and in what way are some characteristics and differences singled out and perceived as undesirable?

Destabilizing the notion of impairment as a biological fact can be tied to further discussions on the concept of identity and the self. Scholars within Disability studies argued that both identity and self should be

understood as shifting, fluid, and dependent on context and social relations (Davis 2002; Shildrick 2012). The emphasis on fluidity rejects a unitary, rational, and stable conception of identity, and challenges dichotomies. As such it problematizes further the seemingly taken-for-granted and self-evident aspects of categories such as disabled, impaired, or non-disabled. This perspective can be related in some ways to the manner in which some scholars in Childhood studies question the idea of competence as an individual skill or ability.

### **Contribution to understanding “impairment” in the day-care setting**

Post-structural perspectives open up a space in which social processes and discursive practices can be explored.

In my study, day-care staff members would at times wonder whether a child’s conduct was caused by disorders such as ADHD or autism. Day-care staff would express concern for what they perceived as problematic conduct as coming from inside the child, potentially constituting a disability/impairment – akin to medical understandings of disability/impairment as an individual characteristic. The problem is represented as an inherent physiological or psychological flaw or unwanted characteristic. Based on a medical perspective the day-care staff members’ descriptions of possible ADHD or autism could be seen as an attempt to discover a potential truth or fact about the child in need of further examination. The aforementioned social model of disability could invite an understanding of how a child with such a diagnosis becomes treated and whether or not he or she faces social barriers at day-care. While the post-structural perspective illuminates how day-care staff members’ evaluations and descriptions are part of discourses that also

construct what they set out to describe. Their descriptions are not understood as neutral, but as situated in a certain context, and as such these contexts, relations, and interactions are explored – not the individual child as an object. The post-structural perspective allows for an inquiry of how certain differences among children are enacted and come into being as deficiencies or flaws. In other words, how disability and impairment are constructed in a specific setting.

This also opens up the possibility to understand a child in a different manner. Seeing impairment no longer as a representation of facts but part of discourses and social processes allows for new understandings and ways of representing people. It enables a focus on how people – including children – position themselves and others in various situations, relations, and context.

### **Disability studies and constructions of “normality”**

Disability studies also engages with the concept of normality, as disability and impairment are constructed against norms and standards of what is perceived as normal. At the same time, normality is constructed in terms of what it is considered abnormal.

Scholars within Disability studies such as Lennard Davis (1997) have argued for attention to shift towards deconstructing normality. Fiona Campbell (2009) scrutinized the “ableist norms” against which disabled people are defined. As Davis states: “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” (Davis 1997: 3). Further Davis (1997) illustrates that the concept of normal and normality as we know it today is a configuration that arose in a particular historical moment.



Historical perspectives can often illustrate how ways of thinking are social and cultural constructs. And with such a critical perspective a possibility to question our assumptions is opened up. To be reflexive about one's own assumptions is crucial in the day-care setting since adults as mentioned continuously evaluate children's development and capabilities. Questioning assumptions does not only relate to normality, but also to disabilities. As Davis and Watson state "Those who are to assess competency in others should first be reflexive about their own prejudices. Moreover, they should question the appropriateness of the criteria by which they judge competency" (2000: 217–218). This is highly relevant for the day-care setting, seeing how normality and what constitutes a normal child is in my experience often left silent as taken-for-granted, tacit knowledge (Franck 2013). Moreover, a focus on normality may change the manner in which children are perceived. In my study I experienced that discussions about children changed when redirecting focus away from how a child was perceived as deviating towards explicitly discussing what the staff considered "normal". When turning the tables so to speak, the issue of normality produced conversations about diversity and positive aspects of children's differences, redirecting attention to diversity in children and how children should be allowed to be different (Franck 2013).

Discussions on disability and normality have parallels to the aforementioned discussion in Childhood studies and explore how certain norms and values (re)produce expectations of normality in day-care children. In the following and final part of this paper I will comment on a few ways to bring the perspectives of Childhood studies and Disability studies together.

## Bringing the fields together

There are some prominent scholars who have brought together perspectives from Childhood studies and Disability studies in their writings, including Dan Goodley, Katherine Runswick-Cole, John Davis, Nick Watson and Louis Holt. In particular, valuing children's voices, experiences, and perspectives is increasingly acknowledged within both fields and has contributed to new understandings of children, normality, and disability.

In addition, both fields were established by challenging dominant understandings of each respective field introducing elements of social construction. Childhood studies scholars argued that children and childhood should be seen as socially constructed, and Disability studies with the social model in the forefront established disability as socially constructed in contrast to impairment. Childhood studies scholars' main critique was directed at traditional developmental psychology for imposing universal standards and for perceiving children as passive, incompetent, and unfinished human becomings (James and Prout 1997). Disability studies on the other hand challenged what is known as a medical model of disability, which has become naturalized as common sense in western societies (Holt 2004b). One can trace clear parallels between perspectives of normal development and a medical definition of disability – both traditional developmental psychology and a medical perspective on disability locate abilities or disabilities and competences or incompetence as inherent individual qualities that can be measured, assessed, and labelled.

Since the establishments, both respective fields can be said to have matured and their discussions developed. In particular

the fields have included perspectives and discussions that challenge a stable notion of identity, ability, and competence. Both fields could be said to recognize the complexity in children's identities. There are authors within both fields who have challenged the divide between the social and the biological or the nature/culture divide (e.g. Prout 2005; Shildrick 2012). However such debates seem to have gained more grounds in the field of Disability studies than in Childhood studies. In many respects Childhood studies could in my opinion engage more with the epistemological stance of children's bodies and physicality. As such the on-going and at

times seemingly heated debates within Disability studies are an inspiration. Disability studies on the other hand have as mentioned a few key scholars who engage with Childhood studies' perspectives, however disabled children are in general a neglected group in research. It seems timely to encourage scholars from both fields to include disabled children in their research in a manner that takes notice of the theoretical challenges and discussions on the notions of disability and impairment, as well as to critically question constructions of both normative and non-normative conceptualizations of children and childhood.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> Slightly amended paper based on trial lecture with the topic: "What are the respective contributions of Disability studies and Childhood Studies to understanding the construction of 'normality' and 'disability' in day-care settings? How can these two perspectives inform each other and be brought together?" Doctoral defence 31 January 2014, at Norwegian Centre for Child Research, NTNU.

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