Normality. The Metamorphosis of an Immutable Concept

Alina Petra Marinescu[1]

Abstract: Objectives: The present article discusses the realm of "normality" starting from the paradox standing behind the concept: a bench-mark always on the move. As a social concept, "normality" is based on the word "norm" understood as what is socially acceptable or desirable in terms of looks, attitudes or behaviours. **Implications:** The individual who doesn't obey the rule is prone to being considered "deviant". The present paper deals with the problematic brought by this labelling, with the subjective motivational process that leads to the social exclusion of the individuals who don't behave in the spirit of the accepted norm and also with the methods people make use of in order to cope with their new status. **Value:** "Normality", a concept apparently denoting stability, has to adapt to various contexts and this thesis seems puzzling. The first and most important condition is that of the highly subjective human nature that comes in contradiction with stability and perfection – features defining the Latin "norma", meaning "right" angle. And still individuals themselves are the ones creating and imposing social norms. **Approach:** In order to try to find an explanation, the paper makes use of the realm of deviance studies and presents the reader with some paradoxical examples as the biblical one where the ejection from Paradise was caused by the crossing of a norm whereas the word "normality" or "normal" cannot be found in the Christian Holy Book. To further picture the dynamics of "normality", a case study analysing the women's social status in three different centuries as reflected in painting was included in the article.

Keywords: normality; norm; deviance; society; adaptation

Normality: a socio-cultural construct, created by individuals and constantly manipulated by them, according to different moments or contexts. The word "*normal*" comes from the Latin word "norma", which means "right angle" or something that is right in the middle. Nevertheless, an individual is an *entity of awareness,* not a chart with a mathematical variation. So, when you take all these statements into consideration, than Sigmund Freud's observation, that *normality* is an ideal fiction, seems almost obvious (Freud, 1974). Moreover, the concepts mentioned above as being in relation to "*normality*" (perfection and the human

[1] Senior Lecturer, PhD, Faculty of Communication and International Relations, "Danubius" University of Galati, Romania, Address: 3 Galati Boulevard, 800654 Galati, Romania, Tel.: +40.372.361.102, fax: +40.372.361.290, E-mail: petra.marinescu@univ-danubius.ro.

being) are prone to be highly incompatible, because of the ever changing quality of human nature. An individual has nothing to do with a "right angle", except for his/her spine, and the dictionary definition for "human being" comes to enhance this allegation: "A superior, social being, characterized by the use of thought, intelligence and articulated speech, as well as, morphologically, by its vertical body (…)" (Dicţionarul Explicativ al Limbii Române, 2008).

Paradoxically, though, society isn't just a restless generator of *normality,* it's also its most fervent enforcer, both on a societal wide scale, and on an individual level. And it's not just institutions that act as co-*authors* of normality, but individuals as well.

Why have people always been so keen on this construct, that is so incompatible with both their nature, and to nature in general? A construct that, because of its quasi-mathematical premise, only deepens the cognitive dissonance that individuals need to successfully manage throughout their entire lives? A purely semantic concept, that has nothing to do neither with the material world, nor to spirituality or the Christian dogma (the word "*normal*" never shows up in the Bible)?

In order to answer all of the questions above, we need to go back to the dictionary, and to its definitions of *normality*: the condition of being *normal,* "the way it's supposed to be, typical, expected, natural", "healthy", "that follows a certain norm". What we can draw from all of these is that normality is tightly related to conformity, and that conformity is closely connected to the norm. To an infinite number of norms, in fact, depending on the field we're exploring, be it medical, religious, and so on. This observation is, I believe, jarring, since the mathematical "attributes" of *normality*, as derived from the *norm*, led us to imagine it as a linear equation, with only one solution.

Focus on its social significance – since it constitutes the foundation for all other more particular fields of interest – and we go into the realm of the so-called *social norms*. Here, "normality is established by opposing a deviant behaviour to a regular one" (Dobrica, 2011, p. 35). We need this opposition in order to pass judgement on certain situations, as well as to define and re-define labels. "Following a certain norm puts a label on the individual and his behaviour: he is seen as a normal person, because he follows social norms, while the deviant becomes abnormal, because he rejects them" (Dobrica, 2011, p. 35).

The first studies on deviance are quite recent, dating back to the 19th century, and appearing as a consequence of the effects caused by the industrialisation of the

urban centres in Europe, but the *normal/abnormal* dichotomy has been around since before the birth of antique societies. In a way, by introducing the concept of *normality* in a context where we've established that it was non-existent, such as the biblical one, we can easily deduce that the fall from Paradise was a consequence of not following a rule – the most important one, possibly the only one that existed at the time. A broken rule that generated an infinity of others – starting with Adam and Eve covering their bodies. Their legend has become, with time, one of the most frequently used means of emphasising the importance of following the rules. And from this example we can deduce that "the normative perspective has a dogmatic component that stems from the assumption that the simple existence of rules means that they need to be followed", but also that the facts stated in the beginning of this paper illustrate an indisputable truth: "This perspective on society doesn't take into account, for the most part, individuals, because it ignores their diversity, as well as the diversity of the social groups that they belong to, the components of their social structure (…), the traits of their sub-groups." (Dobrica, 2011, p. 35*)*

By abiding by the norms, the individual agrees to become a part of a system or a sub-system, within which s/he plays a number of functional parts, whereas by rejecting them he will automatically be excluded from these "mechanisms".

Eve's transgression had a double layered effect: on one hand, she was excluded from a familiar environment, defined as "normal", but regulated by few norms, and, on the other, her inclusion into a society that her and Adam were tasked with building according to a larger set of rules. The status, the safety and the protection – more or less symbolic – that norms offer represent intrinsic human needs that come before the need to fight for individuality. Self-actualization sits at the top, not at the bottom of Abraham Maslow's pyramid of needs (1943). Deviant groups are exceptions that give breaking the norm an aspect of social inclusion. They offer the individual a frame within which he can manifest himself, by validating his actions.

H.S. Becker (1963) theorized the process of social exclusion that a deviant individual goes through, while at the same time being labelled as an "outsider". He also explained the ways through which deviant groups build a new *normality* frame for themselves, by including the one excluded because of his infringement of the norm: "The justification mechanisms of the deviant groups tend to globally reject moral and conventional norms, official institutions, and the entire universe of regular conventions (Becker, 1963, p. 62)." Inclusion within a group comes as a final stage of the deviant's adaptation to a new *social career*, as R.K. Merton calls

it (1938), the first stages of which are the infringement of the norm, followed by his labelling as a deviant.

When society detects a deviation from *normality*, the individual that's guilty of it, of being different, is labelled as "irregular" as is moved to other, carefully normed categories. Just as in the fall from Heaven, the label serves two purposes: of punishing the transgressor and of making him into an example for others. Emile Durkheim, who saw the concepts of *normality* and *pathology* as intrinsic to one another, believed that "the punishment is, first of all, motivated by passion and revenge" (Dobrica, 2011, p. 342; apud Durkheim, 1991, p. 52), but that, at the same time, "its real purpose is to keep society's cohesion intact, by supporting the vitality of the common conscience" (Dobrică, 2011, p. 343; apud Durkheim, 1991, p. 76). The labelling and the expulsion of the *abnormality* assure society that the system built on the norms that exist in the collective mind is fully functional and prove the exceptional nature of the deviance.

And as individuals lend some of their versatility to the concept of normality, labels largely and subjectively vary as well. The only exceptions seem to be the norms set by the state, that are addressed to a large audience and that are applied, at least in theory, in a fixed form. At the same time, though, we mustn't forget the multitude of elements that each law contains. Institutions are organisms that possess the ability to pass laws, to legislate the *normality* of the society. Individuals are invited, at fixed intervals, to share their opinions about institutional norms by voting on them, and this may create the appearance that the norm on which they vote on is both the one they desire and the one that will subsequently be implemented. The decision makers, however, are still just people with feelings, needs and subjective interests.

At this point, it's time we looked closely at the way the institutions set a monopoly on *normality*. This ability is fuelled, first and foremost, by the symbolic power that they have over the masses. A particular type of control is the one belonging the church, one of the oldest and the strongest normative organisms of all times. Even though, as I was mentioning in the beginning of this essay, the word "*normal*" doesn't show up once in the Bible, many social rules are based on symbolic regulations that were first introduced long ago by the members of this institution (as well as their counterparts from other religions). Their strong, long-lasting effect is fuelled by many factors, such as the fact that they've always addressed an extremely wide, relatively homogenous, audience, more or less on the traditional side and mostly uneducated. The needs that generate norms are also the needs that

lead to their acceptance, so the persistence of *normality* can be easily explained through any sort of rite. Even the individual's functional role in society has theological origins: "The responsive norm receives both content and finality. Man was created for God and Godliness. This is the destiny of Man, his fate, his *normality*. His happiness doesn't stem from a blind integration in a system that's supposed to offer him the illusion of it, but from a communion of love, where love is seen as a Man's ultimate fulfilment." (Suciu, 1999)

Another type of power, that exists in a similar framework, is the physical power parents have over their children, whose world becomes nothing more than a set of norms that their parents respect over anything else. Equally interesting is how the theory developed around the concept of *the significant other* widens the meaning of normative labelling and gives nuances to the inclusion function previously discussed. Sociologists Thomas Luckmann and Peter Berger (1992) explain this labelling effect that *significant others* have over children: "(...) a child is born not only within an objective social structure, but, at the same time, within a subjective social world. *Significant others* […] select these aspects according to their own position in the social structure and according to their own, biologically rooted idiosyncrasies (…) Therefore, the child belonging to an inferior class will not only end up inhabiting a very different world from a child born in a superior class, but he will also grow up differently from his neighbour, even though they come from the same class" (Dobrică, 2011, p. 356; apud Berger & Luckmann, 1992, p. 180).

By looking closer at the concept of labelling, Becker suggests a typology of individuals that manifest behaviours outside of the normal range: "the ones who transgress the norm and are perceived as deviants, the ones who don't but are still labelled as deviants (…) and the ones who transgress without being considered deviants (...)" (Becker, 1963, p. 62). This typology emphasises subjectivity as a prime feature in labelling and, therefore, the application of the norms.

Because of the irreversible nature of time and of the dynamics of the human nature, labels are different even if they're applied by the same individual, in the same context, within minutes: *normality* constantly changes, both on a personal and a societal level, faster for the former than the latter. The acknowledgement of *normality* on a wider scale has a longer lifespan, due tot the longer process of implementing the norms that must first pass the test of rejection. This permanent rebellion of society against change comes both as a reaction to the action itself, and as a form of resistance against a change in the already existent *normality*. "By acting as a subsystem of the social, cultural or historical systems, the individual's

development must fall within the coordinates of the system in order for his evolution to be considered *normal*". (Cosman, 2010)

In modern and post-most-modern ages, once society turned from a homogenous mass of individuals guided by a *mechanical solidarity* into organic individuals, adapting to norms is becoming increasingly complicated, because as collectives start disbanding, the individual becomes, as Durkheim suggests, more and more of a *person,* "an autonomous source of action, as long as within him there's something that solely belongs to him and that makes him an individual, something that is more than a manifestation of his generic rase and group". (Dobrică, 2011, p. 344; apud Durkheim, 1991, p. 399) In addition to that, modern society is characterized by infinite desires, which generates, according to this sociologist, *a state of anomy, as a sickness of infinity*. The limits that surround the individual appear as consequences of the norms imposed by institutions or by society itself. The most frequent result of that is the abandonment of the conformity of *normality* and the choice of deviance. A less radical way of managing anomy is, according to R.K. Merton, innovation, that "constitutes how individuals - who accept society's goals, but use institutionally forbidden means in order to reach them - adapt" (Dobrică, 2011, p. 352). This way, individuals renegotiate norms and "solve" the cognitive dissonance created by the state of anomy.

In understanding this process, we might also use another framework in which Merton uses the concept introduced by Durkheim: anomy is the result of the incompatibilities between cultural and social structures. From a cultural standpoint, individuals must reach the same goals, but from a social one, access to resources is conditioned by their non-equal distribution among classes. "Anomy generates *deviance* when one's inability to reach the goals set by society, by his available means, pressures the individual into finding alternative solutions to solve this contradiction" (Dobrică, 2011, p. 351).

Society's adaptation process is slow, because it involves the acknowledgement of the benefits of the new norm, or, at least, it sinking down into the collective mind. Accepting or tolerating the norm, also means becoming one with it. The *normality* shown on TV, for example, is often only rejected on an assertive level by the individuals. Most of the time, that is their only reaction to it. But there are exceptions, because cognitive dissonance can determine a strong, negative reaction from the individual, who must manage the discrepancy of what he has considered normal up to that particular moment and the "new order", and the conceptual world isn't always enough to solve the dissonance.

Man lives, at any given time, within a paradox. This discrepancy comes from the opposition between the rigidity of the norm (an attribute that stems from its very definition) and the extraordinary dynamic of *normality*, as it's seen and applied separately, by each individual. This concept, so inadequate to the human spirit, is closely related to the diversity of the perceptions that shift through one's mind at impossible speeds, but also by people's ability to bend nature, *normality's* favourite space, to their needs and subjective opinions. By answering to this new order, human beings control the space they inhabit by transforming norms in dynamic values, with imperative applicability.

Post-modern society pressures individuals, who face an excessively normative exterior framework, in opposition to their interior one. Consumerism establishes a type of *normality* that is, for the most part, plastic and superficial, far from the reflexive human nature. Permanently trying to adapt to these new *normalities,* in the hope of being accepted by groups with fictitious norms is one of the main causes behind some of the most common problems of the 21st century, such as depression and anorexia. In an increasingly individualistic society, people's need to belong pushes them to actively seek a normality created for a different purpose than to serve the true needs of the human being.
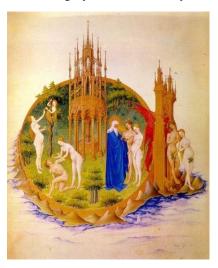
Case Study

The dynamics of *normality*. Women's condition in society, during three different centuries, as mirrored by the representation of Eve in different versions of the banishment from Paradise

In the age of rock art, the purpose of art was to reflect the social context within which the artists were able to manifest their talents, as well as the way in which people perceived themselves and the others. Descriptive painting, inspired by the daily life, was the norm in art ever since the Middle Ages and up to the 20th century, and the human body has always been a source of inspiration. In recent years, the means remained the same, but the purpose changed – the body is now used as a manifest against norms and the brutally enforced artificial *normality*. This initiative, however, is by no means a post-modern invention, since painters have declared their opposition against strict norms ever since the Victorian Age.

Painting is also one of the most efficient means of communicating and internalizing social norms. And the Church, as an institution, has always used painting as a tool for enforcing *normality.* The positions and roles of the individuals were painted on canvas, and shown with titles that put the characters in mythological contexts and

situations which contained numerous underlying messages about the times during which the piece had been created. Secular painters also captured the social realities of their times – regardless of whether they were aware of it or not – according to the norms of their times.

The way Eve is pictured in banishment from Paradise scene is an example of how feminine *abnormality* was reflected in different times, under different social norms: the same symbol, following the norms of the temporal and social time that it belonged to. Paintings tell us a lot of things about women's condition in society, at different times throughout history, according to the artist's vision and what every time saw as normal. At the same time, these works of art are palpable proof of the fascinating dynamic of society.

1)   Duc de Berry, *Tentation, The Fall and Expulsion From Paradise, **1411-1416***

During a profoundly religious time, the Early Middle Ages, the Church's stand against feminine nudity was quite firm. Nudity is a sign of sin, and this maybe best reflects in the representation of Adam and Eve's expulsion from Paradise, created by Duc de Berry (left, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Tr%C3% A8s_Riches_Heures_du_Duc_de_Berry#/medi a/File:Folio_25v_- _The_Garden_of_Eden.jpg),   a   piece   that clearly stated the *normal* condition of a woman. Here, she is blamed and punished and becomes, from then on, inferior to Man, who becomes the only connection to God (Berger, 1992). Adam, as the quintessential man, now has the right to control the woman.

Eve infringes on the norm that had been enforced upon her and falls prey to temptation. And she also persuades Adam to take a bite out of the apple of knowledge. As a consequence, she suddenly becomes aware of her nakedness, and she becomes ashamed of it – sending the message that women must be obedient, that they must not doubt what they're being told or asked to do and that they should only be preoccupied by the roles that the male-driven society gave them. Otherwise, if they oppose *normality*, they will be punished by the Divinity, and attract unhappiness both onto themselves, and the others around them.

Renaissance didn't come with any significant changes to the women's condition, that had been considered *normal* ever since the Middle Ages. They still had to obey men, and only be preoccupied by their house and by raising their children. They had limited access to education.

Moreover, as the first signs of capitalism started emerging, the economical significance of women dropped even more. Sometimes, though, they would inherit their husband's businesses after their death. This norm was mostly followed in Norther Europe.

2) **Jean Mabuse,** *Adam and Eve***, 1520**

Jean Mabuse's painting (left, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gossaert_Thyssen_Adam_and_Eve.jpg) reflects *normality* in the 16th century. This painter abandons the general perspective, that was so typical for the 1400s, and brings the two characters forward. Eve is no longer on her knees, but the way she stands, with her legs crossed, inspires instability, uncertainty. She, as a woman, needs support and encouragement from Adam, who holds his arm protectively over her shoulder. The signs of vice, the dishevelled hair and the apple, are still there. What's more, the woman tries to hide the apple that she wants Adam to bite from. She seems to be "the mother of all evil", deceptive both in appearance and intentions, but also dependent on the man. Her androgynous profile minimizes her motherly qualities.

3) **Gustav Klimt,** *Adam and Eve***, 1918**

Gustav Klimt 's 1918 representation (left, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Adam_and_Eve_Gustav_Klimt.jpg) brings a modern approach to the primordial couple, profoundly different from the ones from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. *Normality* in the 20th century is different. Women were already becoming sartorially emancipated, by giving up tight corsets and rigid hair-dos. Nude bodies were a more normal occurrence. "Being a housewife" or "working" was becoming a question of choice.

Some of the elements of the picture, that reflect the *normal* status of women, were inherited from previous ages: Eve's long, luxurious hair, her nudity, her bent head and her need to be permanently "supported" by Adam. But she is now the main character, and the only one of the two who's aware. Her awareness now is a dynamic and alert, it's encouraged, not blamed, as it was during Renaissance.

Adam appears behind Eve, head bent on the same side as hers, in a gesture of empathy and shared affection. The apple isn't associated with her anymore. And maternity, as it is suggested by her wide hips, is in connection with the *banishment* – modernism is well known for its rebellion against conformity.

We must also notice that, during the contemporary age, which increasingly legitimized feminist movements, unconventional means of communication, such as the Internet, tend to bring forward and enforce a different approach of the expulsion of the primordial couple from Paradise. A common way is by ridiculing it. And for comic effect, sometimes comics are used, cartoons that send a comic messages through a hilarious representation of the characters or through dialogues that are meant to make people laugh.

Sometimes, the two characters from the banishment scene are put in funny contexts. And in these contexts, Eve, drawn according to present norms – sometimes wearing make-up, always thin – has remained an ingenue, who always brings to mind the initial representation, the one where she first fell prey to temptation, sinned and then made Adam sin as well, against his will. However, contemporary norms, shaped by the 21st century emancipation of women, also bring to table representations where gender equality is more obvious than ever. Eve, though, still keeps the defining traits of today's normal woman – long hair, fragile silhouette, closed position.

This study shows that the normal condition of women in society has evolved along with the attributes, attitudes and behaviours that are generally accepted by the majority of the individuals at different times, depending on the cultural and social changes. At the same time, certain attributes haven't changed, both in Eve's representations, and in Adam's. This must make us reflect on the multiple faces of *normality*, as well as on its intrinsic dynamic, that seems to be characterized by a slower shift compared to its exterior manifestations. At the same time, considering the fact that norms, and the norming process, are social constructs, we can easily follow a train of thought towards understanding the way this "bad timing" manifests, influences and leads to the atomization of individuals who are forced to permanently manage increasingly more identity dissonances.

References

Becker, H.S. (1963). *Outsiders. Studies in Sociology of Deviance*. New York: The Free Press.

Berger, P. & Luckmann, T. (1992). *The Social Construction of Reality*. New York: Anchor Books.

Cosman, D. (2010). *Normalitate, anormalitate, sănătate şi boală*. Suport de curs*/Normality, abnormality, health and disease. Course.*

Dobrică, P. (2011). Normalitate, conformare şi devianţă social/Normality, conformance and social deviance. In Vlăsceanu, L. (coord.). *Sociologie/Sociology*. Bucharest: Polirom.

Durkheim, E. (1991). *De la division de travaille sociale/From division to social work*. Paris: Quadrige/PUF.

Eco, U. (2005). *Istoria frumuseţii/History of beauty*. Bucharest: RAO.

Freud, S. (1974). *Nevrose, Psychose et Perversion/ Neurosis, Psychosis and Perversion.* Paris: PUF.

Masslow, A. (1943). A Theory of Human Motivation. *Psychological Review*. 50, pp. 370-396.

Merton, R.K. (1938). Social Structure and Anomie. *American Sociological Review*. Sage Journals.

Suciu, P. Pr. (1999). Metode psihoterapeutice în Pateric/ Psychotherapeutic methods in Pateric. *Lucrare de Licenţă/Final examination paper*. Bucharest: Facultatea de Teologie.

***Dicţionarul Explicativ al Limbii Române/The Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian Language (1998). Bucharest: Univers Enciclopedic.

***Pictures retrieved from: http://commons.wikimedia.org, date: 10.03.2017.