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Special Article

Disability and Monstrosity: Further Comments

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IN the 1980 January-February issue of *Rehabilitation Literature,* Dr. Thurer[22] discusses the characterization of disabling conditions as presented in literature, movies, and drama. Although her literary review was quite comprehensive, she stopped short of attempting to clarify certain etiological factors that may shed light on man's bizarre, and often unfortunate, preoccupation with bodily deformities.

It is this writer's intention to briefly discuss several possible explanations that may partially help illuminate the roots of man's stereotypical, and often negative, reactions toward the physically disabled person as manifested in both literary circles and social interactions.

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The Approach-Avoidance Conflict

Dr. Thurer correctly identifies the defense mechanism of projection as being utilized when interacting with the visibly disabled person. This projection of our real or imagined sins unto the disabled, who we unconsciously believe has already been punished for his or her sin by becoming disabled, is the core of our defense. The approach-avoidance conflict can clearly be identified in such behavior; the preoccupation with approaching the afflicted person as if to persuade ourselves that it is the other who has been punished, while at the same time being repelled, avoiding, and maintaining distance as if still fearing impending punishment, is evident. Such a conflict may be at the root of the "interaction strain" factor described by Siller and others.[21]

Historical Perspectives

Three major theoretical positions, which were advanced in the literature, can be identified in order to better comprehend the aforementioned argument. Heider[14] discussed man's negative reaction to what he perceived to be different and unfamiliar. Cognitively unstructured, and therefore unfamiliar, situations tend to threaten the person whose expectations of what should be the structure of the life space are not being met. This leads the person to withdraw from such a situation (avoidance).

Schilder[20] similarly in his body-image theory postulates that viewing a disabled person, or a person who is physically different, creates anxiety because it negates our mental expectation of a well-ordered body image. The viewer's own unconscious body image is being threatened at the sight of a deformed person (avoidance). Siller's[21] attitude factors of "rejection of intimacy," "generalized rejection," and "reluctant aversion" seem to describe such an occurrence. However, this threat to the body image cannot be experienced unless the person is able to identify, to some extent, with the other person (approach). This ability to identify with other human beings, disabled or able-bodied, is a direct manifestation of what Heider[14] posits as man's interdependence and the connection of belongingness through different human associations (kinship, nationality, religion, race, and so forth). Again, the factors of "superficial empathy" and "distressed identification" discussed by Siller seem to support such a position.

It was mentioned before that the attribution of an evil or a sinful act to the disabled is believed to be the cause of the disabled's affliction. A direct cause and effect relationship exists between the sinful act and the ensuing punishment. But in order to better conceptualize the reactions of fear, anxiety, or threat often encountered in the presence of the disabled individual, a further step must be introduced. This step, which may serve as a link between the already discussed reactions of strain, rejection, and aversion to those of anxiety and threat, was supplied by Meng (reported in Wright[26, p. 261]). Meng discusses an unconscious belief held by the nondisabled with regard to

the disabled. This belief holds that the disabled person may *not* have committed an evil act, but was still punished. That person is, therefore, dangerous since being punished unjustly he or she is ready to commit an evil act to warrant the punishment inflicted upon him or her.

Physical Deformity and Death

In reviewing literature, drama, movies, and television for stereotypical images of the disabled, Dr. Thurer listed several well-known characters famous for their physical infirmities or abnormalities in which evilness is also a conspicuous trait. Listed, among others, were Mary Shelley's Dr. Frankenstein's monster and Bram Stoker's vampire Dracula. To this list can be added the Golem, the Mummy, fairy tale witches, zombies, and more. All of these creatures have, in addition to being deformed, one common denominator—they all imply death (Frankenstein's monster is assembled from dead body parts; Dracula is the undead, as are zombies; and the Mummy is, of course, a dead king being brought back to life). But what about characters like Sophocles' Oedipus, Herman Melville's Captain Ahab, James M. Barrie's Captain Hook, R. L. Stevenson's Long John Silver, and the one-armed elusive murderer in the television series "The Fugitive"?

Bakan, in his classic work, states that a "loss of a limb constitutes the literal death of at least a part which was once integral to the ego."[2, p. 78] In the same vein, blindness can be viewed as a loss or the death of eyesight, paraplegia or quadriplegia as the death of mobility, and so on. The concept of death, therefore, either directly (Frankenstein's monster), by symbolic association (Captain Hook), through biological association (Dostoyevsky's old Karamazov, Oscar Wilde's portrait of Dorian Gray, R. L. Stevenson's Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde—where an aging and deteriorating figure is clearly associated with impending death), or through remote associations (Dickens' Quilp, the Giant from Jack and the Beanstalk—where the two extremes in body stature are associated with lack or loss of regular biological development) is of major importance in attempting to analyze human reactions toward the disabled.

It can therefore be assumed that anxiety, as phenomenologically associated with death, should be related to attitudes toward the disabled. Studies by Kaiser and Moosbruker[15] and Marinelli and Kelz[17] clearly indicated that the level of anxiety is correlated with scores on the Attitudes Toward Disabled Persons (ATDP)[27] scale. Persons whose attitudes toward the disabled were more negative showed more anxiety when interacting with the disabled than persons whose attitudes were more positive.

Physical Deformity, Animalism, and Monstrosity

Dr. Thurer in her paper also mentions stereotypical attributes of evilness associated with the handicapped such as excessive hairiness, wrinkles, and warts. Fictional characters such as Victor Hugo's Quasimodo, Shakespeare's King Richard III (both distorted hunchbacks) are discussed. To these may be added: the Beast from Beauty and the Beast, Franz Kafka's Gregor Samsa from *The Metamorphosis*, H. G. Wells' humanoids from *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, and movie characters such as the Werewolf and the Fly. This list of fictional characters can readily be supplemented with real medical abnormalities such as: John Merrick's rare neurological disease of neurofibromatosis *(The Elephant Man)*, excessive hairiness *(Lionel the Lion-Faced Man* and *Jo-Jo the Dog-faced Boy)*, ichthyosis or skin disease *(The Alligator Boy)*, and Grace McDaniel's distorted facial features *(The Mule-Faced Woman)*, to name just a few.

What is the common element shared by all of these unfortunate, real, and fictional characters? Clearly, it must be their subordination into an infrahuman status. The distinct line that we so vehemently adhere to between human existence and animal existence is suddenly rendered inappropriate. The conflict between the fascination with viewing these extremely distorted human beings (they are often the highlights of circus shows) and, at the same time, the disgust associated with their sight (members of the audience sometimes fainted when they looked at Grace, 'The Mule-faced Woman'[5, p. 321]) is evident. What is it that both fascinates and repels us when viewing these inflicted individuals? What is it that has led us to use such terms as monstrosity (monster equals an *animal* of abnormal or terrifying form or shape), freakiness, and so forth in describing such phenomena? It is a well-substantiated fact that physically disabled persons are judged to be different from so-called able-bodied individuals.

Weinberg and Santana[25] in their study found that physically deformed comic book characters were portrayed as morally evil in 57 percent of the cases. Forty-three percent were portrayed as morally good. *None* of the characters with physical irregularities was viewed as neutral (neither bad nor good).

In the same vein, two recently published books clearly attest to this point. Mannix's *We Who Are Not As Others*[16] and Drimmer's *Very Special People*[5] convey the same message—DIFFERENCE. But at the same time these persons are also human beings; distorted, disfigured, different, but still human beings. This conflict, this cognitive dissonance, is what concurrently fascinates and repels us. The fascination (approach)—they are people just like us—and as such we can identify with them. The repellency (avoidance)—they are

not people, they are infrahuman and therefore cannot be communicated with—and as such pose danger to our own safety.

This fascination-repellency conflict finds different manifestations in the spoken language. Metaphors such as "blind as a bat" readily associate imputed animal characteristics with disabled people. These attributed traits extend beyond disabling conditions into those that generally connote faulty behavioral and moral characteristics. For example, "stubborn as a mule", "clumsy as an ox", "sly as a fox", and "slow as a turtle" come to mind. This is in full contrast to metaphors that connote positive attributes, and as such relate to human figures ("sober as a judge," "innocent as a baby").

Drawing upon psychoanalytic thought, such a tendency to associate presumed animal-like characteristics with disabled or otherwise less than perfect human beings can be approached on two levels: phylogenetic (sociocultural) and ontogenetic (individual-personal). Phylogenetically, Freud[12] and Frazer[10] discussed the emergence of all religions from "animalism" and "totemism." All totem animals were regarded as the ancestors of the different clans. But with the advent of the Judeo-Christian monotheistic tradition, this myth was disregarded for the sake of the belief that all humanity was created in God's image, and therefore "the boundaries (between man and animal) have been defined absolutely and man's superiority to his inarticulate brothers and sisters made an article of faith."[9, p. 149] It is, therefore, this latent content with its threatening images of common past between man and animal that is surfacing and breaking through the barrier of repression when confronted with a person having animal-like skin, excessive facial hair, and contorted facial and bodily features. And it is not difficult to venture and assume that through the process of association the less severely disfigured individual is attributed with similar characteristics. Bettelheim beautifully summarized man's strongly held belief in his uniqueness and superiority as "our unwillingness to admit that these animal-like ('wolf children') creatures could have had pasts at all similar to ours."[3]

On an ontogenetic level, the myth of monsters and freakish-looking characters originates in the child's psyche. According to Fiedler, "it is the child's glimpse of his parents' huge and hairy genitals which perhaps lies at the origin of it all (the myths of monstrosity)."[9, p. 32] It is this first traumatic encounter that may be at the basis of our anxieties and fears when facing "monstrous-like" beings. The anxiety associated with the threatening encounter with the "monstrous" sex organs later extends to monster-like creatures, both animal and human. And it is not inconceivable to infer that from "freaky-looking" human beings this anxiety, which is the harbinger of all future negative reactions and rejections, spreads to deformed individuals in general. Although no direct empirical validation can be found to support this hypothesis, it is a well-documented clinical fact that children's phobias often take the form of animals and animal-like creatures.[4, 11]

If the theoretical position advanced above is correct and there is, indeed, a relationship between attributing infrahuman characteristics to disabled individuals and showing negative attitudes toward them, it should follow that reactions toward physical deviancy would be, on the whole, more negative among human beings than among animals. Wright, in her literature review of sources of attitudes toward atypical physique, came to two major conclusions that can be summarized as follows: *1)* "The belief that lower life forms defile their disabled cannot be accepted as even a rough approximation" and *2)* "If positive and negative attitudes toward persons with disabilities prevalent among the tribes and societies . . . were to be tabulated, there is no doubt that negative attitudes would show a preponderance."[26, p. 253-255] It can, therefore, be partially argued that some support for this contention exists from anthropological studies.

Concluding Remarks

To recapitulate, it is contended here that two major themes are present in the attitudes and reactions toward people with atypical physique: overconcern with death and ascription of infrahuman life. These two themes are at the root of man's existential anxiety. The prospect of death serves as the reminder of man's fallibility and mortality. It is, therefore, future-oriented. On the other hand, the existence of infrahuman life is an indication of man's past, either as a direct evolutionary descendent from lower life forms, or as sharing similar pasts. Such a reminder threatens man's belief in his own uniqueness and superiority. No better proof can be provided for the above point than in Mannix's *We Who Are Not As Others,* when the reader is invited to "Come inside and see nature's macabre human wonders!"[16] Humanity's preoccupation with its "monstrous" and "macabre" reminders continues.

It is, therefore, the duality of human existence, the duality of life and death, human and nonhuman, that can be postulated to be at the bottom of man's attitudes and behaviors toward any reminder of his mortality and any suggested proof of his ancestry. Unfortunately the physically disfigured person happens to be such a reminder, and as such is denied the respect and dignity that we would like to give to and receive from our fellow human beings.

If such a conclusion is warranted, one relatively consistent finding in the rehabilitation literature

seems to be partially accounted for. It is the major difficulty encountered in attempting to alter society's attitudes toward its disabled members. This difficulty exists in spite of a multiplicity of techniques that have been utilized and reported (see Anthony,[1] English,[6, 7] Evans,[8] Hafer and Narcus,[13] Safilios-Rothschild,[19] and Weinberg[23, 24]). Roessler and Bolton reviewed the related literature and concluded aptly that attempts to modify negative attitudes toward the disabled have generally been unsuccessful.[18]

As long as man's conscious ego cannot come to terms with the fact that death is inexorable and wishes to deny his mortality; as long as he is unwilling to admit that superiority is relative rather than absolute and that his past history may have been shared with lower life forms, attempts to modify society's perceptions of and attitudes toward its deviant members are doomed to fail.

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