

You could see me as some kind of normality guardian

Cathrine 🙋 😊 ♀ ■ ♦ ♀ ■

Do you feel normal?

I have a theory that everyone at some point will be in doubt as to whether they are normal. I think that's one of the fundamental paradoxes of the world we live in. You can never know what others are thinking and how their consciousness works. You can't compare yours with theirs. So you can never be 100% sure if you are normal or not.

I believe the majority decides what is normal, and its definition is based on an average of most people's opinion. Yet it depends on what approaches you choose to rely on when you need to define a complex concept like normality. If we take the tangible example of an intelligence test, which I use a lot in my work, then there is a standard distribution. This means that you have tried the test on, for example, 1000 children, and then you figure out the average and the standard deviation. This produces a spectrum where most of the children will be in the middle. It's a statistical investigation of what normal is, and is what you would probably call a "scientific" approach. Since this quantitative way of looking at a scientific approach is of great importance for our society, I also think that it has had great importance for our understanding of normality.

If we are to discuss a different approach to "science", it's hard to avoid Michel Foucault. What comes to my mind is his book *Madness and Civilisation* from 1961, in which he describes how madness as a concept arose as a product of culture; as a man-made construction. You can only have an idea of what normal is if you can define what it is not. Just as we use the night to find out how great the day is. Of course anyone who has read Foucault knows I have simplified his ideas here. Nonetheless, you could say that Foucault argues that certain people throughout history, via certain discourses and certain social developments, have helped to determine what is conceived as normal today.

The perception of normality quickly becomes complex if you want to include both cultural development and scientific progress. But yes, back to the question, the majority of the time I think I have exactly the same thoughts, feelings, values and goals in life as everyone else. Therefore I consider ☹️📧♂️🔪 📧📧📧📧.

You say "the majority of the time". Are there times when you've considered yourself abnormal?

Yes, I would still argue that there are certain situations where I have been in doubt. Sometimes when I have driven myself into some kind of pattern of thoughts, or when I've had some bizarre ideas. Then you start to consider if everyone has these kinds of thoughts, or if you are exceptional in some way, although you would probably always like to think of yourself as unique. Just like when my mum always said: "You're something completely special, little Cathrine."

Working as a child psychologist has led me to consider undergoing some kind of psychiatric diagnosis. I think you owe that to your patients. Sometimes I notice I have a tendency to view the world in a negative manner. Not that it needs to be a diagnosis in itself, that is not how this diagnosis system works at all, but they say that there are some personality traits that make people predisposed to suffer from various psychiatric disorders, such as depression.

So if you were to give yourself a psychiatric diagnosis?

If I had to? It was fortunate that I just said depression and not psychopathy. Yes, I think it probably would be a tendency to depression. Maybe just a minor depression.

I remember once during university, we engaged in a personality test called NEO PI-R, [Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness Personality Inventory-Revised] which measures a person's basic personality traits. When we got the results back, I had a low amount of kindness, high dominance and high neuroticism. Several of us spoke with our professor and asked if she thought our results appeared ♀📧 📧📧📧📧♂️. My profile said that I would be a great and strong leader, but it also said that I did not have compassion and empathy for others, which of course then made me question my choice of career. I assumed a psychologist should be empathetic and understanding. However, our professor reassured us that these results were actually normal within psychology students, so I guess they revealed more about my profession than about me specifically. At that time, for a second, I felt quite abnormal, and this was the first time it was "scientifically" proven that I had a small abnormality.

Do you feel your job is to maintain normality?

You could see me as some kind of normality guardian. I feel that if I can try to keep people on the right side of the normality spectrum, then at least they do not get the stamp that says "You are abnormal". Of course I also have to accept that sometimes there is no alternative but to accept that the child's challenges can sometimes best be understood when giving them a diagnosis. Then they are abnormal in a clinical sense because the diagnosis course is built on what being normal is. This does not mean that I am opposed to making a diagnosis. Sometimes a diagnosis can ensure that the child gets the help they need.

Has your job changed your own perception of normality and your own ideas about the term?

I have certainly become more aware that one can think of normality from many different perspectives. Because of my job, I hold a crucial position where I must think of what normality is in accordance with various kinds of human nature. As the first person the parents and children meet, it is my idea about normality that determines the future of the child. It's an approach that quickly becomes dependent on the individual psychologist, and highlights how important one person's view of normality can be. Of course it's required of me to have a good understanding of the different forms of normality and I believe that I owe it to the children to have this knowledge. There are many reasons why people, especially children, react as they do; why many lie in the grey areas of what is "acceptable". It doesn't mean there is an error in the brain, so it's essential to be careful about how you pass judgement.

A somewhat more concrete example of my own changing perceptions is my intolerance of certain kinds of people. Me and my unfriendly character used to have little time for drunks on the street and children crying in the supermarket, including my boyfriend's children for that matter. Having a narrow-minded outlook on normal behaviour causes you immediately to judge those who differ from you. However, if you have an understanding of normality as a concept that is strongly dependent on culture, geography, and so on, then your tolerance shifts and your own behaviour changes. In response to your question as to whether my perception of normality has changed, yes it has.

Translated from Danish by Louise Laage Toft