

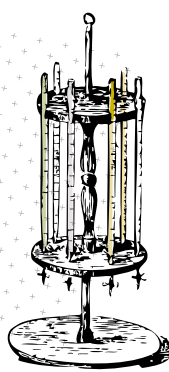


Challenging what is "normal"

Some controversies concerning norms, normality and the conventional in the context of youth

By Marko Pejović

Images by Marlies Pöschl



(How) the context defines the norm

My friend Stojan is a tailor. In the morning, he tailors shirts, jackets and skirts. In the afternoon he attends rehearsals at a contemporary dance theatre. From time to time, he performs in the theatre. In the context of the performing arts in Serbia, Stojan has achieved recognition and enjoys a certain position. He receives praise from theatre critics. When I spend time with Stojan and his friends, I'm a bit confused. I look at their hands and try to figure out what are they talking about. My friend Stojan is deaf and he uses sign language. Among his friends it is "normal" to use sign language. My partial knowledge of that language is not desirable in that community. I have also introduced Stojan to my friends and occasionally he spends time with us. Although he can read lips, it's not easy for him to follow the conversation since we use "common" verbal language. Being in our company, he suddenly becomes the one who is disconnected, the one not in accordance with the norm. This initiated my reflection on context and how it defines what is common, not to use the phrase "normal".



About the criteria of normality

I remember very well from my school days the definition of normality in chemistry: it is another way to express the concentration of a solution and provides information about the number of reactive units in a litre of solution. For example, in a salt such as $MgCl_2$, there are two moles of Cl^- for every mole of Mg^{2+} , so the concentration of Cl^- is said to be 2N (read: "two normal"). The notion of normality is used here to define the relationship between Cl^- and Mg^{2+} in the solution. I believe that something similar occurs in human relations. We are constantly measuring relations (ratios) between parts of the community. Which particles are more numerous (which makes the "others" the minority), whether someone is "singled out" from the average, in what direction (positive or negative) and to what extent.



Psychiatry and psychotherapy have also determined what is normal, according to what is common. Some other criteria are present as well, such as the "capacity of reality testing" and/or "ego strength". It is supposed that there is some desirable level in the development of certain psychic functions, as well as in the development of personality as a whole. Consequently, those who fail to achieve this level demonstrate abnormality in personality structure or have an inappropriate structure for their age.

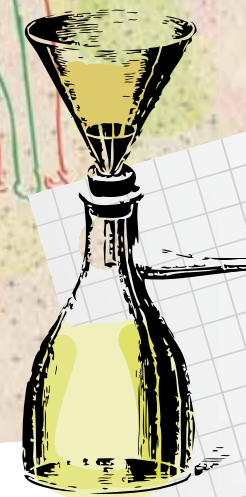
The question I would like to raise at this point is should we measure ourselves against what is average? In ancient Greece civilisation, the benchmark was a philosopher, and educated person or a free individual (to be accurate, this applied to adult males only). The issue is what should be the benchmark in society today, especially in the youth community and who should be the one to set it?



Consequences of an assumption about normality, the norm and "common"

This assumption about the norm (especially when applied to youth) seems to me as very restrictive. To declare that some young individuals, or a group of young people, are beyond some imaginary (or statistical) average, most often means putting them in the margins and abolishing some of their rights. Society forces them to assimilate the majority. Here's a simple example: a group of graffiti artists (and it is well known that a main feature of this sub-culture is to suddenly appear and leave visual comments) is offered to make graffiti on some neatly prepared white walls, in a strictly predefined area. We don't want to have graffiti all over the city, do we? Especially, when we prepared a nice place for it! It makes (some) adults happy (because the number of uncontrolled wall "scribbles" is decreased) and proud because they "support graffiti artists and respond to needs of the youth". However, this is a way to totally restrict and tame one sub-culture in order to transform it into a nice civic sub-category. This is not the context in which society develops. It's a portrait of a society which does not want to face questions or reconsider its values, but to assimilate (graffiti is not the result of too much spare time, but the serious response of young people to social reality). Still, we must not forget that the equilibrium between assimilation and accommodation keeps a social system alive.

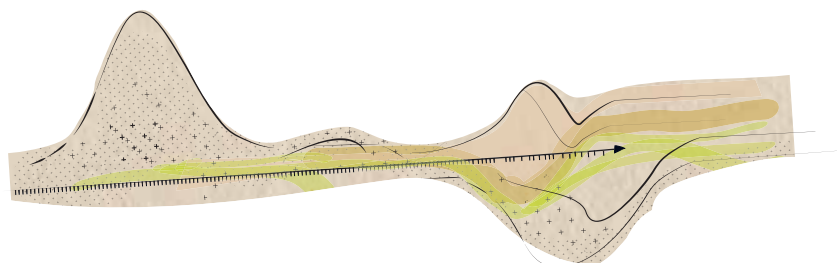




The meeting point of “normal” and interculturality

I see interculturality as the process of mutual influence of (sub-)cultures at their meeting points. For this reason, it is most often referred to concerning meetings of groups with different ethnic backgrounds. For me, it also means the meeting of any two groups with distinctive differences. Some groups of young people, members of the same social group, (for example, football fans or software engineers) can be quite different regarding their values, thinking and behaviour. They can be as far from each other as members of different and distant national groups.

When the group “Let’s...” (Grupa “Hajde da...”) started working on the development of inclusive theatre in Serbia, it was not possible to see the entire picture. We were not completely sure what we were dealing with. We knew from the experience of some European countries and the USA that it was possible to include people with disabilities into dance theatre. However, we were not immediately aware of the obstacles we would have to face. I believe that the greatest obstacles were psychological. A number of experts in the field of disability, as well as part of the community of people with disabilities, believed there was no possibility of success. They didn’t think that a paraplegic or a person with muscular dystrophy could be engaged in artistic dance. Their chief “argument” was that performing arts are meant for bodies that are in accordance with the norm. But contemporary dance is exactly the art form that does not require a “ballet body”. It is open for different bodies and bodies with different abilities. In Serbia, as far as we knew, there were no previous attempts to work with people with disabilities in the context of contemporary dance.



A totally different, but equally important, issue was that of accessible premises (which is a really big problem in Serbia). Another obstacle was mutual communication channels, which were not easy to establish. At the beginning, there were a sign language interpreter present during workshops with deaf and hard of hearing youth. Later we decided to rely on our own forces. Artists and other participants started to learn sign language. There were a lot of mistakes in this learning process – not knowing all the signs, we simply “invented” new ones when we needed them and these became our “slang”. The deaf and hard of hearing participants did their best in lip reading. We managed to create a mutual communication space. Sign language has its own logic. Sometimes it is similar to the logic of verbal language, but sometimes it’s completely different. When we started to recognise this logic, it influenced our way of thinking about the world as a whole (since it is not meant only for hearing people). We tried to present the structure of verbal language to our deaf and hard of hearing friends. This was not too hard for them, since they are familiar with verbal language from everyday situations.

I believe that all participants of this mutual work acquired valuable experience – the deaf and hard of hearing people learned what it means to be engaged in theatre in Serbia and the artists learned a lot of about the position of the deaf and hard of hearing people in our society. The result of this mutual work was two shows, produced in professional theatre conditions. The first of these two performances, entitled “The curve for Gaus” (choreography by Boris Čakširan and Sanja Krsmanović Tasić) included five people with disabilities and three professional artists. The other, “Reset” (choreography by Danica Arapović) included six dancers, with and without disabilities. “Reset” won the prize at the festival of contemporary and new theatre in Novi Sad in 2010.

After five years of co-operation with the group “Let’s...”, my friend Stojan received an invitation to work with Croatian choreographers on a new performance. He may have an international career as a dancer in the future. I sincerely hope that, for people with disabilities interested in theatre and the arts, Stojan’s work will be an inspiration and also, let me put it this way – a new norm.