Acceptance of Imperfection

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Abstract

Because the "ideal human" concept is culturally and socially
bound, then there can be no universal agreement on what
constitutes perfection. Thus, the concept of perfection is
subjective. Further, no one individual can be perfect
because humans are multidimensional and thus will always be
surpassed by others on different qualities that the
individual lacks. The relevance of acceptance of
imperfection to disability studies is explored.

Like it or not, all humans are imperfect. Perfection is an
ideal that cannot be reached (Lazarsfeld, 1991). But why? This
article proposes several explanations why perfection cannot be
obtained by any individual. The implications for disability
studies of the position that no human is perfect will be explored
in this article.

Subjectivity of Perfection

No one individual can have a perfect level of all the
desired qualities of a human. It is an impossibility because as
one deconstructs what an ideal human should be it becomes
apparent that there is no universally-accepted standard of an
ideal human. The ideal human is culturally and socially bound
such that there could be no universal agreement upon the
qualities of the "perfect" individual. Hence, the status of
absolute perfection is subjective and can never be obtained. It
is illusionary to think otherwise.

Perfection is subjective because its definition depends upon
one's social, moral, cultural, personal standards, and world-
view. Thus, any claim upon perfection can and will always remain
a relative perfection. An individual that believes or is believed
to be nearing perfection is only categorized thusly by a select
group of individuals. Not all humans would agree with this
group's claims that the specific human is perfect since there
would be some quality - out of the multitude of qualities that
could be chosen - that this individual lacked as compared to some

other human or humans.

For example, the individual who is placed in a role of "perfection" by a certain group of individuals for some quality, such as a physical feature like slimness, may not be viewed as nearing physical perfection in a culture that values physical abundance or muscularity as signs of physical beauty. Or if a certain individual is recognized for his or her internal qualities, such as being the smartest individual or having the greatest chess-playing abilities, there would be a group of individuals who do not value those qualities of logic and reasoning abilities as a reflection of the "perfect" person. Hence, the fact that no human can be perfect can be understood by a realization that the definition of perfection is itself a subjective viewpoint.

Norms of Perfection

It is common knowledge (conscious and unconscious) that norms exist about what constitutes an ideal human. These social norms refer, more often than not, to the physical qualities that a population of people believe that an individual should possess, such as a whole body of a certain shape and size. Perfection is framed in terms of these social norms and is often (but not always) judged unidimensionally based on physicality. If a newborn baby arrives that does not fit the expected norm of a "perfect" baby due to a physical difference or disability, then it is considered "bad" news that has to be communicated to its parents (Bicknell, 1983).

Unidimensional thinking about people may permit the concept of perfection to flourish. For example, the emphasis upon a certain leanness of body is viewed in certain cultures as a symbol of perfection. However, if multidimensional thinking is encouraged, it becomes apparent that no human can be perfect. Whereas a certain individual may be admired as the most beautiful person or as the most intelligent from a specific cultural viewpoint, we would still be able to find others in that same population who surpass the selected individual on different qualities, such as lovingness toward others, a brilliant orator, or one who has profound spiritual insight.

Thus, no single human is perfect, because 1) no one individual can manifest all qualities that are deemed as representing perfection to a population and 2) a population will never absolutely agree upon what one quality constitutes perfection out of the multitude of qualities existing in a multidimensional sense (e.g. internal as well as external qualities) in individuals. Problems arise when a select group of people decide that one quality is the standard of perfection, whether it be ethnicity or political beliefs, which when taken to the extreme, have been manifested in highly negative, destructive social forces such as Nazism or communism.

In addition to the subjectivity of perfection, for every individual who is deemed "the best" or "highest" on a certain external or internal quality, there will always be another

individual who surpasses the individual on another quality. Hence, the "fiction of perfection" (Lazarsfeld, 1991) usually entails a unidimensional means of viewing of a person by an exclusive focus on one quality. Since every individual is multifaceted, then this fact of the multidimensional nature of individuals precludes the ability of an individual to surpass others on every possible human quality.

The dichotomous thinking of perfection/imperfection is similar to the dichotomous thinking of disability/ability. For example, the phrase describing people without disabilities as "temporally-abled" implies that once an individual has a disability, then they lose all their abilities. This ignores that all humans have a range of abilities and qualities in which they may surpass many others. However, imperfections and disabilities will always exist simultaneously with qualities that may be viewed socially as approaching perfection along with abilities. As Arokiasamy (1993) stated, "Every single person has some ability while no person has infinite perfection" (p. 83).

What needs to be emphasized, when discussing social norms especially in the context of disability, is that no human can become perfect. Some humans may have one or several favorable qualities that are well-developed, but because of the multidimensional nature of humans no individual can be denoted as perfect, flawless, or unequivocally without fault. All humans are imperfect. Many acknowledge that perfection is impossible in real life (Arokiasamy, 1993; Lazarsfeld, 1991; Pacht, 1984). Yet, the strong force of social norms distracts people from this fact. Like the inevitability of death, the fact of imperfection is suppressed and denied by many. Pacht (1984) described a client who believed she was perfect even pointing out that the word "imperfect" can be "visualized as I.M. PERFECT which of course reads, I am perfect" (p. 388).

Application to Disability Studies
The assertion that no human is perfect is relevant to the field of disability studies for many reasons. First, perceptions are held by many people that individuals with physical or mental disabilities are imperfect and thus are avoided due to fear of safety or contagion (Smart, 2001). Such discrimination and stigma is a blatant disregard and denial for the fact that no human is perfect. The anger, avoidance, blame, and stigma that is often heaped upon individuals with disabilities could be explained as a projection of an individual's own insecurity and non-acceptance of the fact that he or she is also imperfect. The projection of the "fiction of perfection" (Lazarsfeld, 1991) unfortunately finds a target in people with disabilities. This may occur because disabilities may serve as a threat to one's conscious and unconscious body image (Livneh, 1982) which may include beliefs about the importance of (physical) perfection. Disability may also pose an unconscious reminder of death (Livneh, 1982) which could be viewed as the ultimate form of imperfection due to not having control over all aspects of one's life.

Smart (2001) reports on the attitude that leads to "imperfect" people with disabilities being blocked or discouraged from marrying or having children due to the concern about passing the "imperfection" onto others. What is wrong with this concept? The error lies squarely in the irrational belief that there are humans who are perfect. Stone (1995) wrote about the pervasive social myth of bodily perfection. Yet, cognitive and emotional perfection should also be included in her analysis. Thus, the bottom line is that it is a myth that anyone can claim to be perfect.

To emphasize once again, perceived perfection is a relative concept according to one's social and cultural viewpoint. Thus, true perfection is unobtainable by humans because there can never be an accepted standard of what constitutes total perfection. In addition, no one human can exhibit all the qualities that are deemed as a sign of perfection since one can easily find another quality of this individual that is surpassed by another individual.

The same logic that is used to counter the perception that there are "perfect" humans can be used to address the thoughts when an individual declares that it is not "fair" that he or she has a disability. Is absolute fairness possible, like absolute perfection? And if so, upon what qualities and by whose standards is fairness (or perfection) judged? Fairness, like perfection, is a perceived quality that depends upon the individual's worldview. "Fairness [like perfection] is not a universal/objective concept" (H. Livneh, personal communication, January 13, 2001). For example, if an individual picks a certain quality claiming that absolute fairness would be that everyone earns the same income (e.g., a communist society), then a problem arises when one individual works harder than the other. Is it "fair" that they are paid the same amount? Translating this into disability topics, is it "fair" that individuals differ widely on any one quality, whether it be physical, emotional, or cognitive abilities? Would perfect fairness be achieved if we all were the same on a specific quality, yet differed widely on other qualities? And who would choose which specific quality would be most desirable for all of us to be equivalent? In a similar way, who decides what qualities would make up a "perfect" person?

Acceptance of Imperfection

Individuals with congenital or sudden-onset disabilities may internalize the stigma that "disability means imperfection" (Smart, 2001). They may view disability as "a constant reminder of imperfection" (Bicknell, 1983). These highly laden, negative connotations of having a disability is one reason why some may argue that an individual should not "accept" the disabled aspect of his or her mental or physical life. However, if the argument shifts from whether one should or should not accept a specific disability that exists in one's life to the argument that all no human is perfect, then the issue becomes: does an individual accept that they are imperfect, like everyone? The fact that

society as a whole denies that each and every person has imperfections and that there can be no perfect person is a larger issue. The negative connotation placed upon physical or mental disabilities by society can be recognized as a form of projection of fears about facing one's own imperfection and finiteness. Thus, a baby with a disability should not be labeled "imperfect" by the parents (Bicknell, 1983) as if there was a human that was perfect.

It seems reasonable to focus in disability research upon how singular individuals react and respond to their disabilities, framed in terms of adjustment to disability, in order to facilitate their greater functioning as reflected by the work of Livneh and Antonak (1997) and others. But another prong in the subject of adjustment to disability would be to confront the rejection of disability by addressing the irrational but widespread social belief that humans are or can be perfect. Instead of the myth or fiction of perfection, other more realistic philosophies could be posited such as "to fail less and less is the only goal human beings are able to reach, since faultlessness is out of the human realm" (Lazarsfeld, 1991, p. 95). Hence, the premises for a philosophy of rehabilitation, as stated by Arokiasamy (1993), should also include that all humans are imperfect.

Instead of an irrational pursuit of unobtainable perfection, individuals should be encouraged to appreciate the unique qualities that they and others have in differing capabilities, amounts, and levels. As an obvious symbolization of imperfection, disability might be utilized to heighten awareness of the fact that is denied and disregarded by many: all humans are imperfect.

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