

RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

What is “normal”?

Dr Mark Kelly, from the School of Humanities and Communication Arts at the University of Western Sydney, has been granted funding from the Australian Research Council’s Future Fellowships program to produce the first historical account of three concepts which influence our day-to-day lives: norms, normality and normativity. This project will examine where these concepts came from and how they are used today, particularly within the life sciences, and ethical and legal institutions.

‘While the concept of a “norm” is familiar to most of us, there is actually no clear definition of it – a norm can be anything from a culturally approved set of behaviours to a statistical average – and it is actually a very recent notion’, Dr Kelly explains. ‘Despite its ambiguity, norms are often used as concrete measurements of what is acceptable and what is not, with individuals that do not conform to these shifting ideals being labelled as “abnormal”. Such labels can lead to isolation and stigmatisation.’ To investigate the emergence of norms Dr Kelly will map the historical use of the concept within academic discourses in three major fields of study, the life sciences, ethics, and law. One of the reasons this research is important is to add to the understanding of how the negative uses or outcomes of using “norms” may be combated, for example, when used to stigmatise people who are different.

Over the four years of his Fellowship, Dr Kelly will examine historical and modern texts for information regarding norms, normality (for example, scientific or biological facts) and normativity (relative value judgements). Using the investigations of French philosophers Georges Canguilhem and Michel Foucault as models, he will produce a text outlining the way in which these aspects interact with each other and with the life sciences, ethics and the law.



Given the widespread nature of norms, normality and normativity in modern society, the findings of this investigation will have implications for a wide variety of institutions not limited to medical, ethical, and legal ones. The proliferation of narrow standards of beauty – new norms of attractiveness – has been linked to a global rise in eating disorders, while religious extremists are driven to reject social norms in favour of simple and absolute frameworks of thought. To understand how such negative effects of norms arise offers the possibility of new approaches that avoid such consequences.

Project Title: The invention of norms: How ethics, law, and the life sciences shape our social selves
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