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Who is normal?

On belonging, care, and a very rickety house of cards

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Normal; adjective

1. usual or ordinary : not strange
2. mentally and physically healthy

Normal; noun

the usual or expected state, level, amount, etc.

Merriam-Webster (n.d.). merriam-webster.com/dictionary/normal

Claude has been used to correct grammar, spelling and flow. The ideas and conclusions are all my own.

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"What's wrong with a person wanting to be more intelligent, to acquire knowledge, and understand himself and the world?"
(Keyes, 2000, p. 75)

This question stands at the centre of the science fiction book "Flowers for Algernon" by Daniel Keyes (2000). This is a rather naïve question, asked by our protagonist, Charlie, when he is already starting to acquire the knowledge and intelligence that he so craves. In his book Keyes cleverly outlines all the reasons why this seemingly innocent question is so wrong in the eyes of many, to the point that even the people who "created" Charlie are averse to him and his intelligence. In the book, Charlie, a man with an intellectual disability, undergoes an experimental surgery that dramatically increases his intelligence, only to find that the world is no more prepared for him than it was before he changed himself. The surgery does not buy him belonging; it simply reveals new ways in which he falls outside what society considers normal.

The story demonstrates how people generally do not fit in. Charlie, going from "retarded" to hyper intelligent and back is never truly accepted by his peers. When he was less intelligent he laughed with his "friends" and was happy in his own knowledge that he was accepted at the bakery where he worked, never knowing he was also being laughed at. However, as soon as he gets the chance to become more intelligent, he takes it. Although he does not fully understand the implications of this decision, he knows what it would mean to be more intelligent; he would fit in. This is an idea that his mother subconsciously put into his mind as a child and adolescent as she needed him to become “normal” so her family would live a happy life. The belief that intelligence is the price of belonging was seared into him.

This is not a problem confined to fiction. The same mechanisms that define Charlie's world operate in our own. Take Tabitha, watching her husband Aaron, diagnosed as vegetative, try to communicate in ways his doctors refuse to recognise (Engelhart, 2026). She is navigating the same system: one that decides whose experience counts and whose does not. Both stories point to something larger than individual misfortune. The fiction of normalcy is not just an abstract prejudice, it shapes who receives care, which language is legitimate, and whose narrative counts. Those who fall outside it can resist and reclaim their lives, but always within a system that was never built for them.

We are animal?

In Keyes' book Charlie is dehumanised in many ways by his environment and by himself. The most prominent example is his comparison with the mouse Algernon, which is woven throughout the whole book. This parallel between disabled people and animals is not new, as Taylor explains in Beasts of Burden (2017). This is a device that is perpetuated throughout disability history. Think, for example, of the circus, where numerous acts of “strange” humans are compared to apes or bears.

As Taylor explains, this is not an inherently negative comparison. She describes in her book how being compared to an animal can be beautiful. We are all animals, animals are intelligent and ingenious, they are different from humans, in a way that is neither good nor bad.

"I feel animal in my embodiment, and this is a feeling of connection, not shame"
(Taylor, 2017, p. 118)

Charlie is compared constantly with Algernon, but it is not written as anything inherently problematic, there is simply a parallel that is being described, readers take this parallel however they wish. Some interpretations of their relationship might be negative, whereas others see it as the beautiful kinship Taylor describes. And this kinship helps both Charlie and Algernon, they are sympathetic towards each other and help one another. At some point they both know, it will end equally bad for them. Even so, Charlie does not often acknowledge his kinship with Algernon. There seems to be some active distancing on Charlie's part, perhaps by way of disengaging himself from comparison with the mouse and something not human. One cannot help but note however, that Charlie doesn't just do this with Algernon, he exhibits this disengagement with everyone, even himself. From the moment that Charlie starts to have the ability to look back on his past, he does not experience memories as something he is going through or went through, he sees a child struggling. He feels bad for him, angry at the people treating him lesser than. But it is not about him and who he is.

The anger that has been bubbling up inside Charlie comes to a head when they are being presented at the conference. He feels the disconnect with the scientists in the room, of which he hoped to feel part of due to his intelligence. The exhibition of Algernon and Charlie as merely science experiments infuriates him. It was Professor Nemur's mistakes, however, that were the last straw. The building knowledge that the scientists who have Charlie's and Algernon's lives in their hands didn't know everything and were not infallible. Realising that both Algernon and Charlie would inevitably revert to their past selves. Charlie opened the cage that contained Algernon and they escaped their custodians together. As he cries out for his fellow man to see him as a person.

"I'm a human being, a person - with parents and memories and a history-and I was before you ever wheeled me into that operating room!"
(Keyes, 2000, p. 112)

Who cares

Miss Alice Kinnian is in many ways Charlies caretaker. As his teacher she sees the potential in Charlie, even before the surgery. Something that seems to be overlooked by the rest of the people in his life. When he found a place to learn, with people that were able to teach him, he was motivated, he eventually learned how to read and write well enough that he can communicate his thoughts to the reader in his "progris riport". He does this purely on his own strength and Kinnian's support. It is this very motivation that caused Kinnian to put Charlie forward to participate in the study. As the progress develops Kinnian starts to care for Charlie in a different way, and this seems to be reciprocated. However, with intellectual intelligence does not come emotional intelligence. Charlie realises his feelings for Alice but is unable to care for her in the way that she needs, something Alice makes painfully clear:

"How do you know what I feel? You take liberties with other people's minds. You can't tell how I feel or what I feel or why I feel"
(Keyes, 2000, p. 87)

It is a charge that cuts both ways, Charlie analyses Alice with the same clinical distance that others used on him. Although Charlie can read signs and extrapolate what others are thinking, he can't engage with Alice the way she needs. At first, she tries to "catch up" with Charlie, reading books and going to lectures in the hopes of getting on the same level with him. When Charlie needs care, Alice gives it to him, but when Alice needs care this is not reciprocated.

And what Alice needs is not necessarily intellectual equality, although it sounds like she thinks that at first. She rather needs his emotional presence. She tells Charlie that something has been lost "a warmth and openness" that his intelligence has replaced (Keyes, 2000, p. 85). She does not need him to keep up with her mind, nor she with his; she needs him to be with her. And that is precisely what Charlie, for all his acquired brilliance, cannot give. This seems to be caused by a convergence of two things. Firstly, Charlie's inability to interpret her needs based on her signals and secondly her own reluctance to show what she needs. Once she does communicate these feelings, their relationship seems to have deteriorated too much already.

Alice's reluctance to show what she needs is not a personal failing; it reflects a broader cultural message that needing care makes you vulnerable. This is particularly underlined for women, they are being told that showing they need care is vulnerable, opening yourself up for infantilization, undermining one's autonomy. Everyone needs care, it simply gets naturalised and made invisible when it fits the norm, such as the need to use public transport. Kittay (2011) introduces the idea of "nested dependencies" where individuals depend on carers, who in turn require societal support, positioning care as a public obligation, not just a private one.

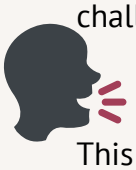
Edwards & Loughnane (2024) also demonstrate this in their participatory research into the reciprocity of care. They emphasize that not only does everyone need care, but everyone can also give care, including the people that tend to be counted out as unable to care for others. Another "normal" example of this can be found with older people. Once people stop working for a pay check they often work in a more informal way, be it (child)care for family members or pouring coffee at the local nursing home. It is interesting to note that among informal carers, the women are a majority (OECD, 2023). This has to do with many factors, but it also drives home that women tend to do a lot more “invisible work”. Care solidarity can go further than the familiar though. A striking example can be found in the movie Pride (Warchus, 2014), which is based on a true story. This movie depicts an LGBT activist group choosing to support striking miners, a community that had largely rejected them, at a time when they were fighting for their own recognition. In turn, the miners stood up with the activist group when it was their turn. Care here becomes an act of political imagination: giving to those who have not yet learned to receive you.

This is what Alice is doing in the beginning, she provides care for Charlie even if he can't fully appreciate what she is doing. But for her it backfires, she ends up deeply caring for a man that becomes unrecognizable in her eyes. This happens two times, when he becomes "too intelligent" for her and when he reverts to his previous intelligence. Charlie cannot provide the care that she needs in either state. Though he doesn't seem to be able to give that care to anyone, including himself. The dissociation Charlie maintains from himself seems to be projected onto Algernon instead. He can be tender with the mouse in ways he cannot be with himself or other people. He cares for him and looks for ways that Algernon can run his mazes without food being the motivation, something that seems very cruel to Charlie. Interestingly, further along in the book he uses this very same cruel method to motivate himself to write the progress reports, internalising the very logic he once found appalling.

Choosing your words

In the book, Charlie and his peers are often referred to as "retarded", a word that would now be considered very wrong and disparaging. But Charlie didn’t view this word as especially demeaning, throughout the whole book it was simply a medical term. The word was first used in a medical context around 1895, replacing terms such as 'idiot' and 'imbecile' that had themselves once been clinical terms (Reynolds et al., 2016). It was only in the 1960s that the term began to acquire negative connotations (Reynolds et al., 2016). It is perhaps no coincidence that Keyes published the original short story in 1959, at a time when the meaning of the word was beginning to shift. This phenomenon is called the “Euphemism Treadmill”, when a word becomes derogatory because it references offensive concepts which calls for a different word to replace the now insulting word. Because the subject matter is the thing that is taboo, the new word will eventually have these same negative connotations (Stollznow, 2020).

A different interesting phenomenon however is that some groups take these words back, such as "queer" for the LGBT+ community or "crip" for disabled people. 'Queer' is a word that moved from an adjective meaning 'strange' to a slur, before being reclaimed by the LGBT+ community as a term of identity (Turton, 2024). The disability community has done the same with 'crip' (McRuer, 2006), reclaiming a disrespectful word and challenging the assumption that able-bodiedness is the natural and desirable state.



Taking back the narrative

This reshaping of the very thing that hurt you is a common occurrence. In Beasts of Burden (Taylor, 2017) this is also highlighted. While Taylor spends several chapters describing the hurtful implications of the comparison with animals in a derogatory manner, she then describes how these very themes have also helped people with disabilities. It is important however that they hold on to their narrative themselves. This way they have agency in how they are presented to the world, and in what light. Still, this is a precarious line to walk. When are you contributing to your own stigmatization and when are you freeing yourself from it? In the case of Charlie, he thought he was escaping his established narrative of being stupid and missing out on the joke, but at the hight of his intelligence, he is still unable to navigate social situations in a satisfactory manner.

Another gripping example can be found in the story of Tabitha and Aaron (Engelhart, 2026). Tabitha could see that her husband, Aaron who has been diagnosed to be vegetative state, was more aware than his doctors seemed to think or be aware of. Tabitha discovered, through reading articles, that it has been proven that some patients in the so-called vegetative state could follow commands when they received advanced neural imaging. The doctors who made this discovery want to be able to do more for these patients, but due to the red tape that surrounds these sensitive subjects it has been a very slow process. Tabitha, who can see that her husband is aware but is also most likely in pain because of medical complications refuses to let Aaron go but cannot move forward and show that Aaron needs different care than he is receiving right now. She is stuck between a rock and a hard place.

Conclusion

In this world we have been dealt a very strange hand, we have so much knowledge and tools to make the world a better place for everyone but anything we build with these cards only makes a very rickety construction, falling down quickly. The fundaments that we must work with do not support the real world. These fundamentals have been built on the fiction of normalcy and rigid structures; it is very difficult to make any changes because the norms are woven throughout and addressing it in one place will simply make it jump up somewhere else. Despite this, people keep building, and that in itself gives some hope. Charlie kept writing his progress reports. Tabitha kept making videos. Taylor's circus performers kept reclaiming their narratives.

None of them fixed the system, but they changed something, even if only for themselves. The house of cards will most likely keep falling. But we keep building it differently each time, and that, slowly, is how the foundations change.

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