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*Humanities Inquiry Step 4*

*Addressing the Discrimination of the Differently Abled*

There is a lot to notice and take in by looking at the archival object of this Humanities inquiry, but there is a feeling that bothers the observer – the wording of its title. “The Large Grotesque Head (Man with Goiter)” is an example of a medieval piece of artwork that depicts a man. Its problematic title brings the issue of this inquiry – discrimination based on being differently abled. This inquiry looks at how differently abled people perceive their so-called “disability”, and how this affects their mental well-being. The effect of the way society views differently abled people on how these people view themselves has been discussed. The laws in place that try to establish equal opportunity for the differently people have also been examined.

The above-mentioned ideas evolved from some of the questions posed forthwith. Why should the man in the picture be construed as “grotesque” or ugly (using the strong negative connotation of the preceding word, grotesque)? Is it because he has goiter or because he has a big skull? Does having a “different” physical appearance change the nature of an individual? An attempt has been made to address these ideas in a sensitive way. This starts right from how we look at being differently abled. Instead of using the word “disabled”, the phrase “differently abled”. The word “disabled” has an intrinsically negative connotation. This provides breeding grounds for discrimination through non-differently abled (“normal” or “able”) people and a lower level of life satisfaction in differently abled people. These ideas are explained later in the paper.

Gautam Krishnan

UT EID – gk7785

1 December 2022

Quan Cohort

The object of this Humanities inquiry is an etched and engraved print by a Spanish artist, Jusepe de Ribera. It is entitled *The Large Grotesque Head (Man with Goiter)*. Currently part of the Leo Steinberg Collection at the University of Texas at Austin’s Blanton Museum of Art, the piece was made in circa 1622, and measures 24.3 cm in length and 17.6 cm in width (“The Large Grotesque Head (Man with Goiter)”). It depicts a man with Goiter. Goiter is a health condition where the thyroid swells up. It is caused by the deficiency of Iodine. Goiter was very common in the period when this artwork was crafted (seventeenth century) because Iodine had not yet been discovered. Today, it is not as prevalent as it was in medieval times (Niazi et al.).

The man depicted seems to be posing for de Ribera. This can be inferred from the



sideward orientation of his head. Given that his eyes are not in the direction of the observer (he is not looking directly at the artist), he is probably observing something in his direct sight that

Gautam Krishnan

UT EID – gk7785

1 December 2022

Quan Cohort

is “interesting” to him. Or maybe he is in thought of something in a far-off place, and his mind is in a place different from his body. Either way, he is deep in contemplation as can be deduced by the small smile on his relatively expressionless face. Maybe he is thinking about a fond time of his childhood at his grandparents’ farmhouse. Perhaps he is thinking about his school-going grandchildren. The exact nature of the jumps in the synaptic clefts of this individual’s head are a matter of speculation, and the observer is left pondering what the man is pondering – a trait that speaks to the high artist capabilities of de Ribera. At the same time, it appears as though the man is frowning, as can be extrapolated from his close eyebrows and wrinkled forehead. This, however, could also be the natural construct of his countenance. The man seems to be wearing what one would now call a “beanie hat” and a sweater. This indicates that either the weather is cool, or that the man is feeling cold.

From the title of the print, it can be inferred that the man is “ugly”. He is depicted with



a “big nose”, a wrinkled face, and a swollen throat. All these features may be considered ill-favored. The title giver’s bias can clearly be observed. A similar piece of art also expresses so

Gautam Krishnan

UT EID – gk7785

1 December 2022

Quan Cohort

called “abnormalities”. It is given above. This is an etching by Adriaen van Ostade (a Dutch artist) circa 1670 – around the same time as the primary object of this inquiry. It is entitled “Peasant with a crooked back” and depicts a man wearing a coat and holding a walking stick (“Peasant with a crooked back”). This piece of art shows how society views differently abled and bodied people negatively. This etching has been included here to emphasize the disparaging nature of trying to describe one’s physical traits. How one views oneself is often a reflection of how society views one (Kilburn 870). Therefore, a damaging portrayal of an individual’s dimensions can cause destructive views of themselves. This has been elucidated later in the paper.

The artist of the object of this inquiry, Jusepe de Ribera (1592 – 1652) was one of the leading painters of realism, especially of violent subjects, in the seventeenth century (“Jusepe de Ribera”). de Ribera was born on Jativa, a small town near Valencia, Spain. He probably went to Valencia to learn painting. Later in his life, he moved to Italy. Although he is known more for his paintings, de Ribera is also known to have created eighteen etchings. As mentioned earlier, his themes are often gory, but represent the realities of life – an artform known as Baroque Naturalism. The object in question also features this quality of the artist. However, it can be clearly concluded that the representation of the goiters hanging from the man’s throat is an exaggeration – the average thyroid volume of school-going children with the same condition (goiter) in a study was found to be 3.63 ml at a Total Goiter Rate of 55.2% (Wang et al. 1). Even after accounting for a growth in bodily dimensions as a child ages, the goiters depicted on the man in the print are much larger than they were likely to be. An observer does not need the exact dimensions of the goiter in the image to draw this conclusion – the proportion of the size of the goiters to the size of the man’s head is unusually large.

Gautam Krishnan

UT EID – gk7785

1 December 2022

Quan Cohort

Although goiter may or may not be considered a disability based on its severity, the issue of *discrimination based on a being differently abled* is an important topic that should be discussed in modern society. The artifact's problematic title links goiter with the issue of discrimination based on being differently abled. It reveals the name keeper's disdain (deduced from the word "Grotesque") for differently abled people. One could argue that an individual from the past cannot be judged by modern ethical standards, but then the question arises of how humans as a race can progress without bettering our past. The word "disabled" has an inherently stigmatizing nature, and is, therefore, not used to describe differently abled people (Leshota and Sefotho 6). For the sake of clarity, it to be mentioned that all people with "disabilities" are described as differently abled. This includes differently bodied people.

As mentioned in the beginning of this paper, it is important to understand how discrimination can be prevented and how society can be more inclusive. This is done by examining the laws that prevent the discrimination based on disabilities. A description of the laws in the India and United States have been discussed here. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016, was passed in both houses of India's Parliament and received the President's assent in 2016. It was effective April 2017. In this Act, a Person with Disability (PwD) is defined as "any person with long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments which on interacting with barriers hinder effective and equal growth in the society" (Math et al.). Similarly, the United States aims to provide equal opportunity of the differently abled through its Americans with Disabilities Act. According to the Act, "a disability is defined as a mental or physical impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities" (Andrews 24). It outlaws any practice of discrimination with respect to occupation, right from hiring to any activity that an employer undertakes. Further, employers

Gautam Krishnan

UT EID – gk7785

1 December 2022

Quan Cohort

are to make accommodations for employees with disabilities based on each individual's needs. Although the laws of these two nations give citizens a sense of who a differently abled person is and how they are to be accommodated, they fail to account for the mental health of these people. Specifically, how differently abled people view their "disability" and how it affects their well-being. This is examined below.

In a study by Ja Young Kim, it was found that many people do not accept that they are "disabled" (3). As mentioned previously, this is because of a strong negative connotation and stigmatizing nature associated with the word (Leshota and Sefotho 6). In the Kim study, it was found that when there was no acceptance of one's disability, there was a strong negative correlation with one's lack of life satisfaction (Kim 2). On the contrary, when people accepted their disability, their level of life satisfaction went up (3). In another study by Chacala et al., it was found that even disabled occupational therapists can have views of disability that conflict with their profession or culture (Chacala et al. 2-4). Therefore, the notion that these therapists are "just people who just happen to have" a disability and that they should be better able to relate other disabled people may be unfounded (1). In fact, it causes obstacles in their profession and can lead to "clashes" in thoughts (5). A solution given by the Chacala et al. article is transparent discussion and openness (8).

From the above findings, a conclusion can be drawn – when there is acceptance, there is inner peace. This principle can also be generalized to the role of society and an individual – when society accepts any individual for who they are rather than their flaws or who they are "supposed to be" (an expectation of both physical and psychological traits that society has from an individual), there will be more happiness. Or in the language of the of the Kim study, this will lead to a greater level of life satisfaction.

Gautam Krishnan

UT EID – gk7785

1 December 2022

Quan Cohort

The object of the humanities inquiry was only a starting point for uncovering discrimination and disability, or at least a part of it. That the wording of the title has led this paper in this direction shows that sensitivity in the choice of one's words is important. Moreover, the Law is insufficient to ensure an equal environment for all individuals – whether differently abled or not. This is where open dialogue comes into play. A solution to a problem only comes up when it is tackled. In the case of disability, open dialogue is the first step. Only with this type of discussion will there be acceptance. As mentioned earlier, acceptance is what brings satisfaction, which in turn brings happiness.

Gautam Krishnan

UT EID – gk7785

1 December 2022

Quan Cohort

### Annotated Bibliography

Adriaen van Ostade. Peasant with a Crooked Back. etching, circa 1670. Museum of New Zealand - Te Papa Tongarewa; Collection: Art; Gift of Sir John Ilott, 1970, JSTOR, <https://jstor.org/stable/community.27022687>. Accessed 30 Nov. 2022.

This is a print by Adriaen van Ostade entitled “Peasant with a crooked back”. Its name has a negative connotation associated with disability.

Andrews, Linda Wasmer, editor. “Americans with Disabilities Act.” Encyclopedia of Depression, vol. 1, Greenwood Press, 2010, pp. 24–26, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX1762700024/GVRL?u=txshracd2598&sid=bookmark-GVRL&xid=e07fa487>.

This article explains the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). It includes what encompasses a disability and talks about the responsibilities of employers in accommodating for disabilities.

Chacala, Aneta, et al. “‘My View That Disability Is Okay Sometimes Clashes’: Experiences of Two Disabled Occupational Therapists.” Scandinavian Journal of Occupational Therapy, vol. 21, no. 2, 2013, pp. 107–115., <https://doi.org/10.3109/11038128.2013.861016>

This article discusses how two disabled occupational therapists see their disability. At times, the cultural beliefs of the participants “clashed” with the values of their profession.



Gautam Krishnan

UT EID – gk7785

1 December 2022

Quan Cohort

The article suggests that openness, for both disabled and non-disabled therapists, could go a long way in solving problems posed by disability with respect to culture and values.

de Ribera, Jusepe. The Large Grotesque Head (Man with Goiter). n.d., Blanton Museum of Art, University of Texas at Austin. <https://collection.blantonmuseum.org/objects-1/info?query=Portfolios+%3D+%22588%22&sort=0&page=7>.

This is my object.

Jusepe De Ribera, [www.nga.gov/collection/artist-info.5343.html](http://www.nga.gov/collection/artist-info.5343.html).

This is the National Gallery of Art's website. It gives a detailed description of de Ribera (his biography) and his works of art.

“Jusepe De Ribera.” Jusepe De Ribera (1591 - 1652) | National Gallery, London, [www.nationalgallery.org.uk/artists/jusepe-de-ribera](http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/artists/jusepe-de-ribera).

This is the website of the National Gallery of the United Kingdom. It gives a short paragraph on the artist of this inquiry - Jusepe de Ribera.

Kilburn, H. Whitt. “Personal Values and Public Opinion.” *Social Science Quarterly*, vol. 90, no. 4, 2009, pp. 868–885., <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6237.2009.00667.x>.

This journal article talks about how there are two conflicts individuals face. The first conflict arises out of one's want for autonomous ideas rather than being governed by public values. The second conflict arises from a want to look after the interests of others as against trying to have a higher social standing compared to them.

Gautam Krishnan

UT EID – gk7785

1 December 2022

Quan Cohort

Kim, Ja Young. “The Effect of Experiencing Discrimination on the Life Satisfaction of People with Disabilities in South Korea: The Mediating Role of Disability Acceptance.” *Social Work in Public Health*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2021, pp. 276–285., <https://doi.org/10.1080/19371918.2021.1875948>.

This article discusses how discrimination based on disability can cause a reduction in the life satisfaction for people with disabilities. Moreover, such people are more likely not going to accept their disabilities. The article goes on to suggest that with acceptance, people with disabilities experience higher levels of satisfaction.

Leshota, Paul L., and Maximus M. Sefotho. “Being Differently Abled: Disability through the Lens of Hierarchy of Binaries and Bitso-Lebe-Ke Seromo.” *African Journal of Disability*, vol. 9, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.4102/ajod.v9i0.643>.

This journal provides a literature review of two works, and analyses the connotation of the word “disable”. The study concludes by stating that the word is derogatory and “represents the abnormal, the unwanted, the ‘other’ and the imperfect in the physical and moral sense” (Leshota and Sefotho, 2020). It gives the phrase “differently abled” as an alternative.

Math, Suresh Bada, et al. “The Rights of Persons with Disability Act, 2016: Challenges and Opportunities.” *Indian Journal of Psychiatry*, vol. 61, no. 10, 2019, p. 809., [https://doi.org/10.4103/psychiatry.indianjpsychiatry\\_105\\_19](https://doi.org/10.4103/psychiatry.indianjpsychiatry_105_19).

Gautam Krishnan

UT EID – gk7785

1 December 2022

Quan Cohort

In this article, The Rights of Person with Disabilities (RPwD) is discussed. Moreover, it discusses the challenges the Act faces even after the amendment of the Persons with Disability (PwD) Act.

Niazi, Asfandyar Khan, et al. “Thyroidology over the Ages.” *Indian Journal of Endocrinology and Metabolism*, vol. 15, no. 6, 2011, p. 121.,  
<https://doi.org/10.4103/2230-8210.83347>.

This article talks about the prevalence of goiters over the centuries. It describes how ancient medicine tried to treat it. In general, it how knowledge of the thyroid gland has evolved to what it is today.

Wang, Peihua, et al. “Low Goiter Rate Associated with Small Average Thyroid Volume in Schoolchildren after the Elimination of Iodine Deficiency Disorders.” *PLOS ONE*, vol. 10, no. 10, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0141552>.

This paper talks about iodine deficiency disorders (IDDs). It goes on to describe how the average thyroid volume changes with the elimination of such IDD.