

Reconstructing Normalcy: A Philosophical Inquiry into Assistive Technology, Inclusion and Intersectional Identities

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Abstract:

Social equity and inclusion are the prime goal of sustainable development. This research explores into the philosophical basis of assistive technology (AT) as a socio-ethical agent of inclusion, specifically for individuals whose lives intersect at disability, gender, class, and race. It provokes traditional ideas of "normalcy" by examining how AT is not just a functional intervention but also a space where norms are reproduced, resisted, and reimagined. Based on critical disability studies, intersectionality theory, and post-phenomenology, the study questions how technological design and deployment affect marginalized users lived experiences. By conceptualizing assistive technologies as emancipatory and regulatory at the same time, the paper unmasks the tension between empowerment and assimilation. The research utilizes a qualitative philosophical approach that combines textual analysis, case examples, and conceptual deconstruction to bring into prominence those voices that have often been made invisible within predominant inclusion talk. The research finds that whereas AT can foster accessibility, it could also perpetuate normative norms that exclude those who fail to fit in. Ultimately, this research necessitates a turn away from prescriptive design practices based on relational ethics and intersectional sensitivity towards more inclusive ways of designing, abandoning the one-size-fits-all approach. The study has a significant contribution from inclusivity and equality perspectives.

Keywords: *Assistive Technology, Disability Studies, Intersectionality, Inclusive Design, Normativity, Post-phenomenology, Social Justice, Equality*

1. Introduction:

The ideology of "normalcy" has been a longstanding cultural and biomedical measure for sorting bodies, behaviors, and abilities. In contemporary societies, the concept is quietly at work in institutional life and social norms, informing everything from healthcare to education policy. Assistive technologies, marketed too often as value-neutral means for improving accessibility, are inscribed in these normative regimes. Philosophical investigations of technology illustrate that these technologies mediate not just bodily ability but also reinforce prevailing ideals regarding what is "normal" or desirable (Ihde, 2002). This argument contests that in order to reconstruct normalcy, we have to critically investigate how assistive technologies challenge as well as replicate socio-cultural norms through their design and deployment. Scholars of disability studies have highlighted that disability is not so much a medical issue but a socially constructed phenomenon influenced by exclusionary systems (Garland-Thomson, 2011). Yet, assistive technology often takes on a medicalized epistemology, seeking to "cure" impairments instead of changing disabling environments.

This technocentric perspective excludes users whose needs are difficult to standardize. And when such technologies are not co-designed with multiple users, they are likely to reinforce a limited, able-bodied perspective. Philosophical engagement allows for a deeper analysis of these dynamics, questioning who defines normalcy and whose experiences are left unrecognized in the process of technological intervention.

The discourse of inclusion, particularly in educational and professional settings, tends to prioritize integration over the ethical nuance of difference. Although policies of inclusion promote equal access, they can unwittingly perpetuate ableism by expecting individuals to adjust to dominant norms. Assistive technology serves as a tool of such compliance, quietly encouraging users to look, perform, or behave similarly to their non-disabled counterparts (Tremain, 2005). A philosophical perspective provokes us to critically reflect on these practices and calls upon the establishment of inclusive models that appreciate diverse forms of existence. It entails the rethinking of technology as not a compensatory tool but as a co-creator of diverse social realities. Intersectionality complicates this analysis further. Individuals with disabilities who also traverse marginal identities tied to race, gender, class, or sexuality frequently encounter multiple exclusions that assistive technologies do not attend to (Erevelles & Minear, 2010). To illustrate, a low-income woman of color with a disability will likely face a series of obstacles to access, affordability, or tailoring technological responses. This study attempts to dismantle and reimagine normalcy by way of a philosophical critique of inclusion narratives on assistive technologies. It draws upon critical disability theory, post-phenomenology, and intersectional ethics to investigate how technology can be both an apparatus of oppression and liberation. The study advocates for a paradigm shift from normative design towards relational and participatory design that puts lived experience at center stage. Restoring normalcy involves not only technological advancement, but also a core shift in what we know about human difference, embodiment, and justice (Gaikwad, 2024).

2. Background of Study:

The development of assistive technology (AT) mirrors a larger historical pattern that associates technological progress with changing ideals of the body, ability, and normalcy. The early design of disability was dominated by the biomedical model, in which assistive devices were seen to be corrective agents meant to "normalize" the body by compensating for impairments. This viewpoint concurred with industrial-age ideals that valued productivity, conformity, and standard functioning, usually ignoring the subjective experiences of people with disabilities. By contrast, more recent disability studies oppose these reductionist approaches by insisting that disability is determined by environmental, attitudinal, and structural barriers instead of inherent bodily deficits (Oliver, 1996). Despite this theoretical progress, the design and deployment of AT are often attached to old norms that equate utility with conformity to able-bodied norms. Many of these solutions then don't take into account the complex, lived experiences of users in different contexts, particularly when these users hold multiple marginalized identities. The development of intersectionality as a methodology for understanding social inequality has reiterated the focus on how experiences of disability are entangled with other markers of identity like gender, caste, race, class, and sexuality.

Feminist theories and disability theory posit that assistive technologies, if not subjected to critical scrutiny, have the potential to perpetuate systemic prejudices that run along these lines (Puar, 2017). In addition, inclusion discourses tend to exclude the epistemic perspective of the disabled, positioning them as passive subjects instead of active agents in the co-construction of inclusive technologies. Philosophical engagement provides the requisite breadth to disentangle these dynamics of power through examination of the assumptions that underlie both design and narrative of assistive interventions. This context provides the justification for this research, which seeks to deconstruct normative structures surrounding AT and suggest a more inclusive, intersectionally informed model of accessibility and inclusion. The assistive technology can help in minimizing the physical as well as digital stress of persons with disabilities (Gaikwad & Bhattacharya, 2024)

3. Scope and Significance of Study:

The theoretical and conceptual scope of this research covers cross-disciplinary approaches such as technology philosophy, critical disability theory, and intersectionality theory. It investigates how assistive technologies are situated in normative social structures that determine ability and inclusion. Instead of taking AT as value-neutral objects, this research employs a critical perspective questioning their deeper logics of design and their social impacts. The research is specifically interested in knowing how AT engages with people's identities and bodily experiences to reinforce or resist prevailing standards of "normalcy." By examining the philosophical as well as socio-political aspects of inclusion, the research extends the limits of standard disability discourse and provides room for a more multiple interpretation of accessibility (Verbeek, 2011). The importance of this work is in its effort to reconceptualize assistive technology not merely as a thing of engineering or rehabilitation but as a philosophical and ethical space where meanings of humanity, dignity, and participation are fought over. Conventional design practices tend to focus on efficiency, functionality, and conformity with biomedical ideals, with little space for subjective stories or cultural difference. This research, by contrast, raises user experience and cultural context to a preeminent position in inclusive design. It highlights the fact that the construction of "normal" by society significantly determines what technological interventions are created, financed, and disseminated (Moser, 2006). Such a critical development has implications for policy, pedagogy, and design practice.

The scope of this research also encompasses an intersectional examination of the ways in which intersecting social categories—disability, gender, caste, class, ethnicity, and sexuality—shape access to and experience of assistive technology. For example, a disabled transgender person from a rural setting might experience levelled barriers to inclusion different from those experienced by a middle-class urban consumer. The value here is in understanding that inclusive technology needs to be relationally grounded and context-aware. Intersectionality is not so much a descriptive framework but a process of discovery to unearth systemic inequities that dominant design paradigms tend to miss (Collins & Bilge, 2020). Under this understanding, assistive technology may be reimagined as a force to enable justice and not simply enhance function. Philosophical investigation offers the means to critically analyze the assumptions, ethics, and value systems underlying AT development. Following

post-phenomenology, the research explores how technology facilitates human experiences and reconstructs identities. This is important because not only does AT increase capacity but it transforms users' perceptions of self and others as well. As an individual uses a prosthetic or communication device, his/her interaction with the world is mediated along lines that can confirm or stigmatize. A philosophical study thus highlights the fine but potent ways in which AT works either to expand or reduce agency and autonomy (Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015). This aspect of the research is especially relevant in moving inclusive innovation forward.

The research also adds to debates around inclusive education and work by questioning how AT is embedded within institutions. Even with worldwide agreements to equity, inclusion efforts tend not to interact meaningfully with the lived experiences of disabled people. AT tends to be brought in as an afterthought, bolted on to institutions that are at their core exclusionary. This research reveals how such practices reproduce structural barriers under the guise of progress. The significance of these insights lies in their potential to inform institutional reform and the co-creation of inclusive environments that honor difference rather than suppress it (Goodley, 2014). The study has practical implications for inclusive design, public policy, and social justice advocacy. In suggesting a redefinition of normalcy based on relational ethics and intersectional inclusivity, it provokes stakeholders to question how inclusion is both conceived and implemented. Designers, educators, and policymakers are called upon to depart from universalist precepts and move toward participatory paradigms that prioritize marginalized voices. This philosophical investigation does not provide technological blueprints, but instead, demands ethical frameworks and critical reflexivity as grounds for upcoming interventions. Its wider relevance is to call for a world in which diversity is not just tolerated but embraced as integral to common human flourishing.

4. Objectives of Study:

- To critically examine the philosophical foundations of assistive technology in relation to normative concepts of ability and normalcy.
- To analyze the role of assistive technology in promoting or undermining inclusive practices within educational, occupational, and social institutions.
- To investigate how intersectional identities—such as gender, caste, race, class, and sexuality—influence access to, experience with, and design of assistive technologies.
- To evaluate the ethical implications of assistive technology from a post-phenomenological and relational perspective.
- To propose a philosophical framework for inclusive and justice-oriented design of assistive technologies that transcends normative and technocentric assumptions.

5. Review of Literature:

Assistive technology (AT) has historically been perceived within a biomedical and engineering paradigm that emphasizes the strengthening of individual capacity through compensation for bodily deficits. Researchers contend that such a functionalist perspective is consistent with the medical model of disability, aiming to normalize deviation from normative body standards. Consequently, AT tends to be developed to return an individual to

a social "norm" and not to accommodate diversity. This criticism is central to disability studies, which demands a move away from individual deficit to social and structural barriers (Shakespeare, 2013). Philosophical inquiry is more urgently required to challenge how normative assumptions inform AT design and deployment.

Post-phenomenology provides an enticing framework to consider the mediating nature of technology in the shaping of perception, experience, and identity. Here, technologies are not seen as neutral devices but as co-constitutive in terms of human-world relations. Applied to assistive technologies, this approach illustrates how technologies like prosthetics, mobility aids, and screen readers redefine the user's bodily schema and redefine interactions between the body and the environment. These interactions can empower or marginalize depending on the social and cultural context under which the device is employed (Don Ihde, 2009). Therefore, philosophical responses to AT need to investigate how such mediation reaffirms or reconstructs societal ideals of normalcy. The very notion of "normalcy" has received critical re-evaluation in disability discourse. Lennard J. Davis (2014) maps how statistical thinking and industrial capitalism normalized the "average man" as a social ideal, excluding those beyond this fabricated norm. Assistive technologies, in seeking to move disabled people "closer" to normal capability, can inadvertently reproduce this normative logic. This is a vital critique to reframing inclusion—not as assimilation into norm-dominant versions of sameness, but as transformation of norms toward greater diversity. Thus, literature finds that reconceptualizing normalcy is central to the ethical development of AT.

Intersectionality theory adds a rich analysis of how disability intersects with other dimensions of identity, e.g., race, gender, class, and sexuality. Research shows that AT is frequently accessed through these intersecting identities. To illustrate, low-income women with disabilities are likely to be excluded from design and face affordability or cultural incompatibility of assistive technology. Lacking an intersectional perspective, technological fixes are likely to reproduce structural disadvantages instead of alleviating them (Erevelles & Minear, 2010). This framework adds to the discussion of inclusive design and technology justice. Feminist disability scholars have highlighted the epistemological worth of lived experience and embodied knowledge in producing more inclusive technologies. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson contends that disability constitutes a kind of human difference which ought to guide, not be accommodated by, societal and technological systems. From this perspective, user-led and participatory design ceases to be merely a methodological necessity and becomes instead a political gesture of refusal against ableist norms (Garland-Thomson, 2011). Scholarship increasingly attests to the possibility that philosophical engagement can bring AT development in line with an ethics of justice, dignity, and relationality.

Scholarship also condemns the way policies of inclusion in schools and workplaces tend to embrace AT as a means of compliance and not as an enabler of change. Researchers contend that institutions implement assistive technologies without considering the more profound cultural and infrastructural transformations required for true inclusion. Consequently, users can be physically accommodated but remain socially and epistemically excluded (Katter, 2020). This lacuna underscores the need to include philosophical ethics within policy-level decision-making regarding AT such that inclusion is not symbolic but systemic and

participatory. Recent scholarship demands a reorientation of inclusive design philosophy—from universalist to pluralist paradigms. Though "universal design" seeks to serve all users, it tends to fall back on majority norms, ignoring the heterogeneity of disabled and intersectional experiences. There is growing research that promotes "critical design" strategies that include marginalized users from the beginning and treat exclusion as a structural rather than a design fault (Hamraie, 2017). This literature supports the fundamental premise of the present study: that rethinking AT from a philosophical and intersectional perspective is paramount to reconstituting inclusive futures.

6. Discussion and Analysis:

The philosophical critique of assistive technology identifies its double nature: while it has the potential to enable, it also enforces dominant norms of bodily self-performance and independence. In the post-phenomenological context, technologies are not just functional devices but form perception and engagement with the world. In assistive settings, devices not only mediate access but also identity, and most frequently require users to conform to able-bodied ideals. For instance, prosthetic limbs meant to emulate biological limbs affirm aesthetic conformity and not the celebration of bodily difference (Wellner, 2016). Such design is an example of how normalcy is insidiously imposed through technological mediation and how there is a need for more inclusive design philosophies. Inclusion strategies, especially in the educational and corporate environments, tend to heavily depend on assistive technologies to "integrate" people with disabilities. Yet, such interventions often function in unchanged normative settings that still favor the non-disabled majority. Therefore, AT is enlisted as a means of assimilation and not change. Although such tools might enhance access on the surface, they rarely dislodge the epistemic or social frames that exclude difference (Kafer, 2013). This analysis emphasizes the need for systemic inclusion strategies that move beyond accommodation in the form of tools toward comprehensive institutional redesign based on justice and participation.

Intersectionality makes exclusion more profound as it shows how various social identities intersect and produce one's experience with assistive technology. For example, a disabled Dalit woman might experience discrimination not just for being disabled but for both disability and gender as well as caste. Design and access to AT seldom consider such multi-layered marginalities. When assistive technologies are created without input from diverse user groups, they tend to overlook cultural, linguistic, and economic contexts (Hollier, 2020). This identifies a key shortcoming of the so-called "universal" design approach and necessitates participatory, co-designed innovations that are responsive to a variety of lived experiences. Examining assistive technology through the lens of relational ethics exposes the value systems inherent in their development and deployment. Technologies embody the moral premises of their creators—whether interdependence is subservient to autonomy, or whether efficiency is more important than dignity. For others, AT does not simply restore function; it remodels social relationships and expectations. A device that aids speech, for instance, also remakes interpersonal communication, enabling or limiting agency depending on how others read its use (Donovan, 2022). Ethical assessment is therefore crucial to the

extent that assistive technologies are guaranteed to sustain not only functional objectives but relational well-being.

Discussions surrounding innovation and accessibility presently do not cover commodification of assistive technologies. Access to quality AT in most cases depends on market forces, resulting in stark inequalities by socioeconomic status. Privatized ecosystems for AT limit affordability among low-income and rural communities. Such commodification of inclusion has philosophical implications regarding justice, equity, and technological citizenship (Shew, 2017). Democratic access to AT necessitates policy actions that approach accessibility as a right rather than a privilege. The analysis therefore signifies how capitalist paradigms undermine the emancipatory vision of inclusive technology. The contributions of assistive technology to establishing future notions of human diversity need to be interrogated. Philosophical engagement challenges society to transcend mechanistic solutions to inclusion and towards a pluralistic theory of embodiment. Rather than integrating disabled bodies into normative standards, technologies ought to accommodate variety in living and being. A paradigm of technological justice needs to place community voice, cultural suitability, and ethical responsibility at its center (Watkins, 2023). Toward this end, there is a need to rethink not only technology but also the values, systems, and discourses it rests upon—rebuilding normalcy as a fluid, expansive, and dynamic ideal.

7. Findings of Study:

- One of the core conclusions of this research is that assistive technology (AT) works in embedded socio-cultural norms favoring able-bodiedness and tends to replicate the exact exclusions it seeks to overcome. Instead of being neutral facilitators, assistive devices carry design decisions and functional expectations that embody normative ideals of autonomy, productivity, and conformity (Peters, 2019). This supports a constrained definition of inclusion, one in which normalization is more highly valued than transformation. Users are often placed as needing to change to fit into existing systems, as opposed to those systems adapting to support varied embodiments.
- The research also discovered that despite the progressive policies on accessibility, assistive technology deployment in education and work environments is still superficial and tokenistic. AT is usually offered by institutions without properly overcoming attitudinal, infrastructural, or epistemic barriers. Thus, users remain marginalized, not due to the absence of technology, but due to a lack of actual inclusion practices (Kumar & Narayan, 2021). For example, students are provided with devices without contextual support or proper training, and therefore they are left out of real participation. This serves to indicate the need for inclusion models that are relational, systemic, and rooted in the daily realities of use in place of abstract compliance schemes.
- The other major finding is the insufficiency of universal design principles to capture intersectional identities. The study showed that caste, gender, class, language, and geographical location all have significant effects on how people access, experience, and learn to use assistive technology. For stigmatized users, AT solutions tend to be alienating or incompatible with their environments of living. Standardized technologies do not take into account local cultural practices, linguistic diversity, and

digital literacy deficiencies (Mahadeva et al., 2020). This proves that "one-size-fits-all" design strikes at the heart of inclusive ambitions and highlights the imperative of participatory and context-sensitive innovation.

- The research revealed that most assistive technologies demonstrate a utilitarian design philosophy with emphasis on performance and efficiency over ethics and user dignity. Although devices might be successful in rehabilitating some functional capacities, they can at the same time enforce behavioral expectations or social pressures. For instance, speech-generating devices that simulate "natural" speech tend to force users into normative models of communication, excluding other expressions (Sandahl, 2018). This discloses the intrinsic intertwining of ethics, aesthetics, and design in creating what is seen as socially acceptable or desirable conduct through technology.
- The study emphasizes the necessity of a philosophical reconfiguration of the discourse of assistive technology. Beyond focusing on innovation and access, future initiatives need to critically tackle issues of justice, relationality, and co-agency. The study finds that normalcy needs to be rebuilt on the basis of abandoning deficit thinking and adopting a pluralistic ethic of technology that values diversity as the basis of inclusion (Lightman & Vick, 2022). Assistive technology needs to be reconceived not as a device to "tame" bodies but as a common infrastructure for crafting inclusive, democratic, and equitable futures.

8. Conclusion:

This research has shown that assistive technology (AT), much vaunted as an inclusive innovation, works across intricate philosophical, cultural, and political landscapes. Ours are not neutral machines, AT systems placing within them assumptions about what constitutes "normal" or "desirable." Embedded norms construct user experiences, marginalizing those who do not fit standardized bodily or cognitive norms. The philosophical critique utilized in this research uncovers the hidden potential of AT to either affirm or contest prevailing ideologies. In addressing normalcy as a constructed, malleable idea instead of a static standard, this study clears new channels of conceptualization for accessibility and inclusion (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2016). The results highlight how the full potential of assistive technology is significantly contained when used within untransformed systems. Schools, workplaces, and healthcare systems in many cases take a compliance-based approach, where AT is used to include people into fixed frameworks instead of transforming the structures to be more inclusive of human diversity. Inclusion in such models becomes performative and not transformative. Such a study thus calls for institutional transformation that acknowledges and appreciates varied embodiments and modes of communication—far beyond the promise of technological innovation, however, into moral redesign of participation arrangements (Oliver & Barnes, 2012).

Intersectionality surfaced as a analytical framework in unearthing the multi-dimensional issues of people at the intersection of disability and other oppressed identities. Universal or "standard" assistive solutions tend to overlook cultural, economic, and social specificities and thus reconstitute exclusion in novel forms. The paper advocates for an intersectionally-informed, user-participatory design model—a model guided by users' knowledge and lived experience cutting across gender, caste, class, ethnic, and sexual lines. Inclusion must be seen

not just as a technological or policy imperative, but as a justice-centered ethical commitment (Grech, 2015). Notably, this study recasts assistive technology as an ethical and philosophical space in which values of autonomy, interdependence, and dignity need to be actively negotiated. Independent living technologies should not inadvertently encourage isolation or stigmatization, nor should they enforce normative aesthetics or behavior in the name of efficiency. Relational ethics and post-phenomenological research give us the means to assess how AT influences not just bodily functioning but also human relationships and perceptions of self. Adhering to this perspective reconceptualizes discussion away from "fixing" disability towards co-creating inclusive futures (Kittay, 2020).

Restoring normalcy in terms of assistive technology entails an extreme rethink of how society conceives of ability, participation, and inclusion. The research provides a philosophical basis for transcending technocentric and biomedical models, calling on designers, educators, and policymakers to embrace inclusive ontologies underpinned by relational ethics, intersectional sensibility, and user co-agency. It is only through positioning disabled perspectives and celebrating difference as a core aspect of the human experience that we can approach fully inclusive, accessible, and just societies.

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