

Book Review

Brian, K. M., & Trent, J. W. (Eds.). (2017). *Phallacies: Historical intersections of disability and masculinity*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Reviewed by Elena Delavega, Ph.D., MSW, & Destiny Hope Higgins, BSW
University of Memphis

Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics, Volume 15, Number 2 (2018)
Copyright 2018, ASWB

This text may be freely shared among individuals, but it may not be republished in any medium without express written consent from the authors and advance notification of ASWB.

Phallacies: Historical Intersections of Disability and Masculinity is a collection of stories taking the reader on a remarkable journey. This book provides an opportunity to consider disability and masculinity from the perspectives and experiences of many different individuals. This thought-provoking book speaks to the very soul of the Social Work Code of Ethics through its perspicacious evaluation of the narratives presented herein.

The book is broken down into four main parts and subdivided into 15 individual chapters. The authors sought to integrate masculinity studies and disability studies. Part I, titled *Is He Normal?* contains four chapters meant to explore the definitions of what *normal* means, as well as the language and historical occurrences that affected how some in society are labeled and treated as being less than their *normal* counterparts. The first chapter in Part I, called “Disabilities Other: The Production of ‘Normal Men’ in Midcentury America,” written by Anna Creadick, explores the ways in which eugenics and the ideals of Nazi Germany played a pivotal role in the definitions of normal and disabled that we still understand. Creadick provides an intriguing analysis of the history of this language as it evolved during the postwar period. The author describes the time when, visiting her father who was dying of cancer, she took a walk to clear her head. During her walk, she came across an antique store selling figurines representing accepted normal for male and female bodies. These figures were called Norm and Norma in postwar America to highlight their normality, or correctness. The author reflects on the models she had seen in a German hygiene museum,

also portrayed as the ideal and proper human, next to plans for the Nazi death camps, and presented as the ideal for which all humans should strive.

Chapter Two, titled “Harry Darger and the Unruly Paper Dollhouse Scrapbook,” by Mary S. Trent, is a literary evaluation of the life and works of Harry Darger, who (following the death of his parents) was sent to an asylum for “self-abuse,” a euphemism at the time for masturbation. In this chapter, Trent explores the social mores of Darger’s times (Darger died in 1973) and the oppressive nature of social norms that inhibited the free expression of the individual and labeled Darger as a deviant. Trent also discusses the artists and artistic forms that emerged to challenge the accepted definitions of appropriate behavior and masculinity.

Chapters Three and Four explore the intersection of race, gender, and disability and how these are presented through the media. Chapter Three, titled “Black and Crazy: The Antinomian Male in North American Consciousness,” explores the depictions of the African American male in cinema and media, how the media influences the existing social expectations of men, and how these expectations vary for Caucasian and African American men. Chapter Four, titled “Masculinity or Bust: Gender and Impairment in Russ Meyer’s *Faster Pussycat! Kill! Kill!*” is an evaluation of the way that disability, gender, sexuality, and race are presented in cinema from the 1960s and evaluates the implications of the presentation of these subjects via film. This chapter provides the reader with an understanding of how the presentation

of disability, through the depiction of disabled characters, influences social perceptions.

Part II, titled *War, Manhood, and Disability*, comprises three chapters, all about the issues of war and disability from varying perspectives. Chapter Five, titled “Marketing Disabled Manhood,” by John M. Kinder, explores the presentation of disabled bodies in postwar America from many time periods: from World Wars I and II, up to the more recent war in Afghanistan. The author presents and analyzes propaganda from the government and advertisements from major companies like Wrigley’s. Chapter Six, called “Half A Man: The Symbolism and Science of Paraplegic Importance in a World War II America,” focuses on evaluating post–World War II films that include disabled veterans returning from war, such as *The Men*, featuring Marlon Brando as a veteran in a wheelchair, and the implications for masculinity or the loss thereof that a wheelchair implies. Chapter Seven, titled “A Blind Man’s Homecoming: Masculinity, Disability, and Male Caregiving in First World War Britain,” brings a new perspective on not just the depiction of the disabled war veteran, but also the male caregiver assisting the disabled veteran in postwar Britain. By evaluating the writings of a British male caregiver and the writings of a journal he edited called *The Gazette*, the author builds a case for challenging socially accepted norms and standards of masculinity and the ontologies and actions that define masculinity: a case that strives to show that though society tried to emasculate the male caregiver and the injured male veteran, both men successfully reasserted their masculinity and value as survivors of war.

Part III, titled *Disabled Man as “Less Than a Man,”* includes Chapters Eight, Nine, and Ten, and discusses topics ranging from hysteria in 19th century France, to evaluating photographs of people with disabilities taken from 1860–1930, to a murder trial from 1944. In the collection of photographs in Chapter Nine, the reader is introduced to cards depicting individuals with disabilities and intended to cause pity and promote donations. The

most interesting chapter in this section is the trial discussed in Chapter Ten, in which the writers Ivy George and James Trent discuss the Noxon murder trials of 1944 involving a disabled man accused of killing his infant son who had been born with Down syndrome. This murder was described by journalists of the time as a compassionate killing and underlines the view, prevalent at the time, that disability prevented a full masculine life. The trial, subsequent appeals, and ultimate pardon lasted for five years and enthralled the American public. In this chapter, the authors suggest that Americans at this time believed some lives were not worth living, a view that may still exist.

The fourth and final portion of this book is called *Men and Boys as “Supercrrips,”* and includes Chapters 11 to 15. This section explores the interactions between disability, masculinity, and social desirability and provides various perspectives from which to analyze the ways in which society shapes the perceptions of men and masculinity and disability. Chapter Eleven explores reports in the late 19th and early 20th centuries of suicide clubs and their connection to perceptions of masculinity and disability. The authors pose that society and the media often push the idea that death is better than disability and support eugenics in the context of a capitalist society that promotes the exploitation of the useful individual. Chapter Twelve, titled “Making Useful Men,” by Rebecca Ellis, informs the reader about the history behind the Roman Rosell Institute and Asylum for the Blind and the evolution of education for the blind in Argentina in the 19th century. Ellis evaluates these programs and states the prevalent belief at the time was that the blind could never live and work on their own. Chapter Thirteen, titled “Weeping and Bad Hair,” explores the role of Christianity in shaping societal perceptions of ethical and bodily normativity and in categorizing femaleness and female bodies as inferior and lesser than maleness and male bodies. In Chapter Fourteen, titled “Porgy and Dubose,” Susan Schweik talks about the novel *Porgy*, by DuBose Heyward, and the later adaptation by George Gershwin in the musical *Porgy and Bess*.

Schweik discusses the character Porgy and how disability, masculinity, and social marginalization interact, but at the same time can be overcome and provide beauty in humanity.

This book ends with Chapter Fifteen, called “Masculinity and Disability,” in which the authors discuss Ernest Hemingway. This chapter is an intriguing account of Hemingway’s life and the imposition of the female gender on the young boy by his mother. Through an evaluation of Hemingway’s writings, letters, and novels, the authors provide an interesting analysis of the many mental health disorders the writer suffered, their connection to gender and disability, and the accepted social norms that governed them. Though the end result is the beautiful collection of works of fiction Hemingway left to the world, the mental illness that plagued the author brought him much suffering.

This text forces the reader to evaluate the biases that have been created by the language we use to describe differences of any kind in our societies. Since the creation of disability as the antagonistic opposite to normal in our societies, those labeled as disabled have been subjected to judgment and even forced from society through institutionalization. Through evaluation of the language surrounding disability and its historical origin, as well as inclusion of the voices of the disabled, this book promotes empowerment of the disabled by challenging the ways society views, advertises, and talks about disability. The value of the dignity and worth of the person is preeminent in the Social Work Code of Ethics (NASW, 2008), and this book provides a rich array of perspectives from which to explore it in the context of masculinity, disability, and a capitalist society. This book challenges the very notions of disability and masculinity that have been imposed by society and invites the reader to reject the labels that limit our shared humanity. This book offers such a diverse collection of opinion and experience that it is an ideal and necessary addition to any academic discussion on disability in social work.

Reference

National Association of Social Workers. (2008). *NASW Code of Ethics (Guide to the Everyday Professional Conduct of Social Workers)*. Washington, DC: Author.