



Reconfiguring Medical Model: Exploring disability in "Flowers for Algernon"

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Abstract

The article critically examines Daniel Keyes' short story, *Flowers for Algernon*, through the lens of the Medical Model of disability. The Medical Model of disability views disability as an individual's impairment or deficiency requiring medical intervention. This article critiques the Medical Model that insists on fixing or treating an impairment even when it does not cause pain or illness, as observed in the case of Charlie Gordon. The narrative follows Charlie Gordon, a mentally disabled man who undergoes an experiment that significantly enhances his intelligence initially, but leads to a quick deterioration of his cognitive abilities. The research has been formulated with a specific focus on the ethical complexities surrounding human experimentation, especially in the case of mentally disabled people. The aim of the article is to challenge the prevailing Medical Model paradigm and advocate for a shift towards Social Model that promotes inclusivity. The research thus promotes dialogues surrounding medical interventions, self-empowerment, and the reevaluation of the discourse of disability.

Keywords: Ethics, Medical Model, Mental Disability, Inclusivity, Social Model

Introduction

Daniel Keyes published "Flowers for Algernon" in 1959 originally as a short story in the April issue of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. As a short story, "Flowers for Algernon" won a Hugo Award in 1960. Keyes expanded the story into a novel in 1966, which won the Nebula Award, given every year by the

Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Association. Although Daniel Keyes wrote several other works throughout his career, he continues to be renowned for "Flowers for Algernon".

The short story was inspired by a number of events in the author's life. For instance, Keyes's parents opposed his desire to pursue a career in writing in favor of pre-medical studies. This discord prompted Keyes to contemplate on the theoretical enhancement of intellectual capacities in individuals. Although Charlie Gordon, the protagonist of "Flowers for Algernon" is not based on an actual person, the unwavering resolve portrayed by Charlie to enhance his cognitive abilities was inspired by one of Keyes's pupils. Keyes has recalled in one of his interviews how one of his students in a class for children with intellectual disabilities begged to be transferred out. According to the author, the child has implored, "Mr. Keyes, this is a dummy class," the child said, according to the author's recollection. "If I try hard and get smart before the end of the term, would you put me in a regular class? I want to be smart" (web). This earnest entreaty of the child left a lasting impact on Keyes, ultimately influencing the thematic underpinnings of "Flowers for Algernon".

Overview

"Flowers for Algernon" is a short story written by Daniel Keyes, originally published in the April issue of *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, 1959. "Flowers for Algernon" written in the form of journal entries allows the readers to delve into the thoughts and experiences of the main character, Charlie Gordon. The story follows Charlie Gordon, a mentally disabled man in his late 30s who works as a janitor. He is chosen as a test subject for an experimental surgery that aims to enhance human intelligence. The surgery has previously been performed on Algernon, a laboratory mouse that has shown remarkable cognitive improvement.

After the operation, Charlie begins to undergo a rapid and profound transformation. His intelligence and cognitive abilities dramatically increase, and he becomes exceptionally intelligent. Through the journal entries, Charlie records his thoughts, observations, and interactions with others, providing a deeply personal account of his transformation. As the story progresses, the journal entries become a window into Charlie's inner turmoil as he navigates newfound intelligence and its impact on his identity. Charlie's intellectual growth leads to a series of personal and emotional challenges, as he struggles with the moral and emotional implications of his transformation. He grapples with feelings of isolation, alienation, and a growing awareness of his past limitations. Suganya et al discussed in their article, "Gender Performance on the Reinvigoration via Food", food offering helps to reduce the feeling of isolation, alienation, and also helps to promote inter and intra personal relationships. (Suganya et al, 890)

Throughout the story, Charlie's journey is juxtaposed with Algernon's, who begins to deteriorate mentally after initially showing great cognitive improvements. As Algernon's condition worsens, Charlie becomes determined to find a solution or a way to stop the same fate from befalling him. "Flowers for Algernon", explores the complexities of the human mind and the impact of intelligence on one's life. Charlie's transformation raises

ethical questions about whether increased intelligence necessarily equates to a better quality of life, the morality of tampering with nature, and the potential consequences of scientific advances.

Medical Model of Disability

Disability as viewed through the Medical Model, characterizes an individual's impairment as inherent flaws that cause limitation in one's everyday life. This Model suggests that individuals with disabilities should receive treatment and therapy to fix their impairment so as to conform to societal norms. Society expects everyone to behave according to their gender roles. "Specifically, society expects an individual to behave, groom and express themselves based on their gender" (Suganya et al, 879). Some critics argue that this approach can lead to a narrow understanding of disability, placing the responsibility on the individual to adapt and conform to society rather than addressing societal barriers and promoting inclusivity.

In "Flowers for Algernon", the protagonist Charlie Gordon undergoes an experimental surgery to increase his intelligence, which is presented as a medical solution to his intellectual disability. The short story "Flowers for Algernon" challenges the Medical Model in several ways:

1. Dehumanization: The Medical Model approach dehumanizes disabled people, as it views them as problems to be fixed rather than individuals with inherent dignity. Charlie is initially viewed as less than human due to his intellectual disability, and the surgery is presented as a way to make him normal and accepted by the society.
2. Lack of agency: The medical Model strips disabled people of their agency and autonomy, as it positions them as passive recipients of medical interventions. Charlie has no say in the experimental surgery that he undergoes, and the consequences of the surgery are largely out of his control.
3. Critique of medical intervention: The story also critiques the idea that medical intervention is always the best solution for disability. While the experiment initially increases Charlie's intelligence, it ultimately leads to his regression and a loss of his newfound abilities. This suggests that the medical model of disability may not always be effective or appropriate. "Flowers for Algernon" challenges the Medical Model of disability by presenting a nuanced and complex portrayal of disability and by questioning the assumption that disability is always a problem to be fixed.

Ethical dilemma and individual agency

Human enhancement, defined as the augmentation of physical, cognitive, or emotional capabilities of individuals beyond typical human capabilities, has witnessed substantial progress in recent decades. As advancements in science and technology accelerate, the ethical implications of human enhancement have become a subject of intense debate. The use of human enhancement technology challenges several values:

1. Autonomy: Human enhancement technologies challenge the value of autonomy, as they might be used to alter an individual's traits or abilities without their full understanding or consent. This raises questions about whether individuals have the right to make choices about their own bodies and minds, and whether they should be protected from coercion or manipulation. "Flowers for Algernon", addresses a number of important ethical issues

like the ability of experimental subjects to understand how an experiment might affect their lives and to give informed consent based on this knowledge.

The story opens with Charlie's progress report entries where he mentions being selected for a potential surgery. The initial entry reads, "I hope they use me. Miss Kinnian says maybe they can make me smart. I want to be smart" (Keyes 5). Although, Charlie's decision to undergo the surgery arises from his ardent wish to become smart and to get along better with others, "Then I'll be able to read better and spell the words good and know lots of things and be like other people" (Keyes 8), he remains unaware of the potential risks of the surgery. It is evident that Charlie does not possess the cognitive ability to give consent, when he states, "I felt proud when he said that not everybody with an eye-q of 68 had that thing" (Keyes 7). Charlie's low IQ score indicates his diminished capacity and inability to give consent to participate in the surgery (Collett 72).

2. Safety: There are concerns that these human enhancement technologies might be rushed to the market without adequate safety testing, or that they might be used in ways that are not safe or effective. In "Flowers for Algernon" the uncertainty surrounding the surgery's outcome, the extent of Charlie's intelligence enhancement, and the potential long-term consequences becomes apparent when Charlie states in his journal entry, that Algernon is a special mouse, "the first of all the animals to stay smart so long" (Keyes 12) . Thus, to an extent, the research team capitalizes on Charlie's limited understanding, using him as their first, willing human subject to evaluate a half-tested theory (Collett 67).

Conclusion

The pursuit of human enhancement stands at the intersection of scientific ingenuity and ethical considerations. It is paramount to remember that behind every scientific endeavor lies the potential to impact human lives profoundly. So, one needs to approach this cautiously, respecting an individual's values and choices. Ethical considerations should not be viewed as constraints, but rather as guiding principles that uphold the dignity and autonomy of each individual. "Flowers for Algernon" serves as a powerful narrative urging the adoption of a Social paradigm that calls for a society which values and embraces individuals like Charlie, recognizing that their contributions enrich the fabric of our collective humanity. Embracing a social model ensures that individuals with cognitive differences can lead fulfilling lives, unhindered by societal prejudices or barriers.

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