

## Call for papers

# Two-day workshop “Ever met anyone normal?” Historical constructions of normality, sanity and health

*The PULSE Network for Medical and Health Humanities meets the European University Institute*

**Dates:** November 5 and 6, 2026

**Location:** Badia Fiesolana (EUI), Florence and online

**Contact:** Chiara Lacroix and Annelies van der Meij  
[normalityworkshop@proton.me](mailto:normalityworkshop@proton.me)

### Aim and rationale

The aim of this workshop is to bring together historians to investigate how notions of normality, sanity and health have been constructed, enforced, and contested across history, from the early modern period to contemporary history.

Echoing the famous poster of the Dutch organisation Pandora at the height of the 1970s counter-psychiatry movement – “Ever met anyone normal? And... did you like it?” – we invite participants to interrogate the obviousness of the “normal” and to reveal its historical origins across both European and non-European contexts.

Over the past few decades, fields such as Disability Studies, Gender Studies, Mad Studies, and Crip Studies have emerged and flourished. These interdisciplinary areas critically examine normative assumptions about health, productivity, and personhood, often from positions outside normative able-bodiedness, able-mindedness, or the heterosexual matrix.



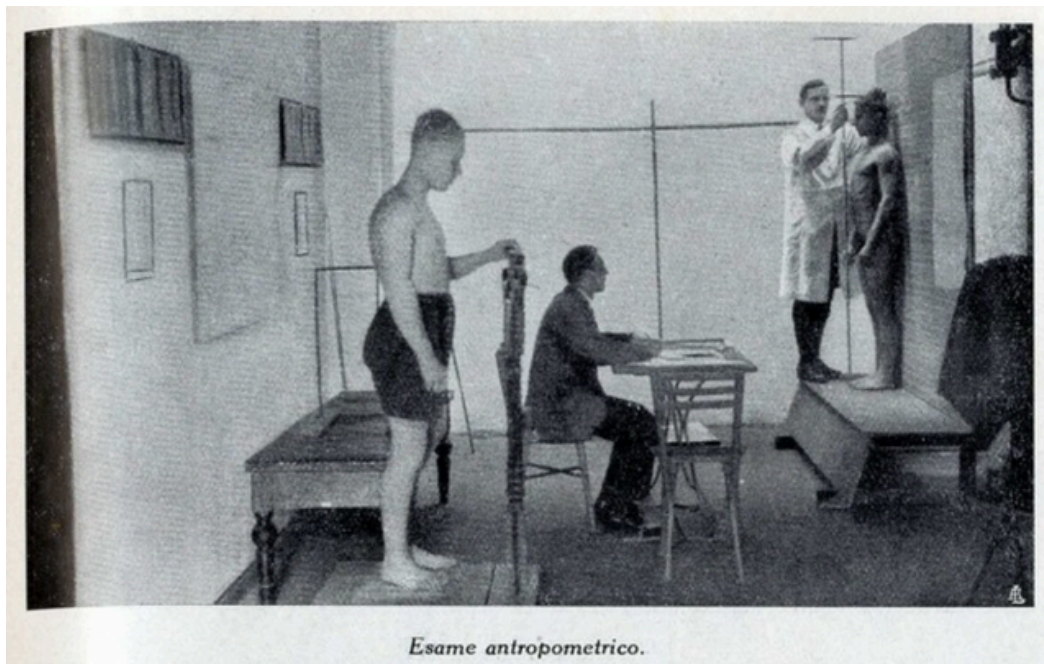
Stichting Pandora, “Ever met anyone normal?” 1973/74. Source: International Institute of Social History (IISG) Amsterdam

This workshop seeks to add a historical perspective to these areas of study. Building on recent historical scholarship that “flips the script” on mental illness, disorder, disability, and gender binarism, we ask: What has it meant, in different social, cultural, and political contexts, to be considered healthy, sane, fit, straight, able, but also smart, stable, competent, productive? How do these normative concepts relate to each other, how have their boundaries been drawn and policed, and by whom? What institutions, forms of expertise, and social practices have sustained these categories? And how have individuals and communities contested them, whether by resisting, subverting, demanding inclusion, or creating new norms? By historicising notions of normality, sanity, and health, we aim to denaturalise them, revealing their contingency, instability, and embeddedness in power relations.

## Structure

The workshop will be structured around three thematic sessions, each featuring a short lecture by historians Monika Baar, Geertje Mak, Manon Parry and Disability Studies scholar Leni Van Goidsenhoven. Each session will focus on a different aspect of the historical construction of normativity, including themes such as the making of heteronormative standards, the historical relationship between normalisation and consumerism, and the way both disability and ableism are present in history-making institutions.

Each lecture will be followed by short presentations from invited speakers. As the workshop wishes to facilitate active discussion and participation, speakers are encouraged to focus on one idea, source, or case study (works in progress are welcome) in order to stimulate feedback and engagement from the audience. Please see details below for applying.



"Medicina e Sport," in *Lo Sport Fascista*, June 1928. Source: Biblioteca Digitale del CONI

## Invitation and selection

We invite interested historians from the PULSE network and EUI community to send us a 200-words abstract, including a title, detailing their proposal for a presentation. We especially welcome contributions from early career scholars (PhD/postdoc). Researchers from outside the EUI and PULSE may also apply, though please note that we will give priority to people in these networks. Everyone, independent of their affiliation, is very welcome to join us as an attendee, either on site or online.

If you would like to participate on site and cannot access institutional funding for it, we may be able to provide a small bursary to cover travel or accommodation costs. If you wish to request a bursary, please include this in your application, specifying your position and need. Feel free to e-mail us for any questions regarding participation and accessibility.

Please send your abstracts to Chiara Lacroix (European University Institute) and Annelies van der Meij (University of Amsterdam, PULSE) at [normalityworkshop@proton.me](mailto:normalityworkshop@proton.me). The deadline for applications is **June 30, 2026**. Applicants will be notified of the result in July.

# Keynote speakers

## **Geertje Mak (University of Amsterdam, PULSE) – Doubting Normality, Sanity and Health from Within**

Departing from my own work on gender normativity and heteronormativity in European historical cases of 'masculine women' and 'hermaphroditism', I will doubt these norms from within as opposed to criticizing them from a counter position. So, instead of judging a physician for his heteronormative standard in dealing with a person whose sex is considered doubtful, I suggest to rather ask: which heterosexuality is used as a standard here? Or, I will juxtapose one dominant norm to another dominant norm, which in some situations might not very well fit and undermine each other. With this I hope to invite the audience to consider a strategy of criticism that avoids an (unintended) reaffirmation of dominant norms, by undoing their monolithic character as well as their uniqueness: gender normativity and heteronormativity are not 'alone' but in conversation with other dominant norms.

## **Monika Baar (European University Institute) – (Re)constructing Norms: The Historical Case of Left-handedness**

While much attention has been devoted to the deconstruction of norms, far less has been given to the ways in which norms are actively (re)constructed. Behaviours that exist outside an assumed norm do not simply resist it; they often generate their own norms and justificatory frameworks in relation to it. This paper examines the historical case of left-handedness, focusing in particular on twentieth-century social movements that advocated for left-handed writing. It explores the cultural, scientific, and consumer contexts in which these movements emerged and gained traction. The decline of discrimination against left-handed individuals was shaped by neurological arguments (linked to ideas of creativity and genius) as well as by commercial developments, such as the production of specialised objects like left-handed scissors.

## **Manon S. Parry and Leni Van Goidsenhoven (University of Amsterdam, PULSE) – Disability Heritage: Participatory and Transformative Engagement**

Who gets remembered, and who gets forgotten, and what does that tell us about how normality has been constructed and enforced? This presentation draws on our co-edited volume *Disability Heritage: Participatory and Transformative Engagement* (Routledge, forthcoming 2026) to argue that heritage institutions have historically policed the boundaries of what counts as worth preserving. Drawing on contributions from eleven countries and across critical Disability, Mad, and Crip Studies, we will examine how ableist assumptions are embedded in archives, museums, landscapes, and performance traditions, and how they can be contested and subverted.