

Definitions of abnormality:

Abnormal is a very powerful word. When we call someone's behaviour abnormal, we're not just giving it a label. We're saying that on some level it is wrong and should be changed. Because labelling people as abnormal can have important consequences, psychologists need to be careful how they use the term and precise about what it means. There've been several attempts to formally define abnormality. Each of them has its strengths but all of them are affected by serious limitations. Following are four such definitions:

1. **Statistical deviation-** To define abnormality in terms of statistical deviation is to say that things are abnormal if they are infrequent. The rarer something is, the more abnormal it becomes. E.g. IQ- the average IQ in the population is a 100. Only 2.5% of population has an IQ below 70 points and this is where the line is drawn between normal and abnormally low measured intelligence. Statistical deviation can be a precise way to distinguish between normal and abnormal characteristics and is a strength of it. Once it is established how rare things have to be for them to be regarded as abnormal, that criterion can be applied by anyone, removing the rather subjective factors from the process of judging abnormality. But there are problems such as having to decide where the line is drawn between normal and abnormal and this is always going to be fairly arbitrary. Furthermore, this model does not consider the desirability of a trait or behaviour. An IQ of 131 is just as rare as an IQ of 69 but it is not considered as abnormal in the sense in which most people use the word. And there are many traits that are rare such as left-handedness that have no bearing on a person's normality or otherwise. Depression in 27% of elderly people is a characteristic that is frequent but that does not make it normal.
2. **Deviation from social norms-** If we define abnormality in terms of social norms we're saying the behaviour is abnormal if it violates the rules of an activity in the groups we belong to. The rules are rarely made explicit and we may not be able to articulate them clearly, but we notice when a person breaks them because we find their behaviour incomprehensible or feel uncomfortable or threatened. E.g. We don't normally sing in public places. So if someone starts singing on a bus, we will think of their behaviour as abnormal. The model lacks the precision of the statistical approach as in judging the abnormality of behaviour, we need to consider which norm is violated, to what degree and the importance attached to the norm in the social group under consideration. This introduces a problem because norms are violated all the time. But depending on how, where, when and by whom, we may judge a person's behaviour as funny, rude, eccentric or criminal rather than abnormal. Norms also vary from place to place and often over time. So what's considered abnormal by one group might be considered normal by another group in a different place or time. Further complications are introduced because we can only make a judgment about behaviour depending on the context in which it occurs. Also, this definition is susceptible to abuse as classifying people as abnormal in this way makes it easier to get rid of people who don't conform to a certain view. E.g. Throughout the mid to late 20th century many Eastern European countries put people who didn't agree with the government to mental institutions, saying they were "abnormal" for not agreeing with their own social norms. Ultimately the norm violation definition of abnormality simply requires too many subjective judgments to be of any real use.
3. **Failure to function adequately-** The failure to function criterion says that people are abnormal if they are unable to carry out the behaviours necessary for day-to-day living such as looking after their physical appearance and health, having employment or another occupation, interacting meaningfully with others and so on. People are reckoned to be functioning at an inadequate level if they're in personal distress, endanger themselves or other people or their behaviour is

unpredictable, irrational or incomprehensible. Although this approach makes intuitive sense, it also has its problems. First, what counts in adequate functioning is largely defined by social norms. So this definition has many of the same problems as the norm violation one. Second, most people find it difficult to function properly at certain times following a bereavement for example. Many would find it difficult to carry out normal activities and they would be in considerable personal distress. But we wouldn't regard this as abnormal. In fact, we'd probably consider it abnormal if someone in this situation didn't seem distressed. Third, lots of people do things that have the potential to do them harm like smoking, mountain climbing or skipping psychology lectures. At vast we may consider such people as reckless or foolish. We don't typically regard them as abnormal.

Rosenhan and Seligman (1989) suggest the following characteristics:

- a) Suffering
- b) Maladaptiveness (danger to self)
- c) Vividness and unconventionality (stands out)
- d) Unpredictability and loss of control
- e) Irrationality/incomprehensibility
- f) Causes observer discomfort
- g) Violates moral/social standards

This approach is too reductionist as there are other factors involved in the diagnosis of abnormal behaviour and not just simply suffering.

4. Deviation from ideal mental health- An alternative approach to the first three is rather than attempting to define what is abnormal, to define what is normal and say that any person who doesn't match this definition is to some extent abnormal. Predictably, there's disagreement on what it means to be normal but many psychologists agree that it would include a positive view of the self, autonomy and the ability to meet the demands of the environment, the ability to have meaningful relationships with other people and an accurate perception of reality. This definition also suffers from the problem that what it means to be psychologically healthy is largely a matter of social conventions and these vary a great deal from place to place and over time. There's also a problem with this criterion-based approach that very few people meet all the criteria all the time. This being the case, if we say that normal people have to have environmental mastery, accurate perception of reality, positive view of the self and others and so on, then most of us end up being classed as abnormal. So it becomes normal to be abnormal and we're back where we started. Thus, a person may not fulfil any of Jahoda's criteria but still have ideal mental health.

6 characteristics of ideal mental health (Marie Jahoda-1958):

- a) Positive view of the self (self-attitudes)
- b) Capability for growth and development (Personal growth and self-actualisation)
- c) Integration (Being able to cope with stressful situations)
- d) Autonomy and independence
- e) Accurate perception of reality
- f) Environmental mastery (ability to meet the varying demands of day-to-day situations)

Three problems all the definitions have in common are:

- 1) Subjectivity
- 2) Under- and over-inclusivity
- 3) Cultural relativity

Clearly, none of these simple definitions fully captures what we mean when we call something abnormal and in the diagnosis of abnormal behaviour sometimes infrequency is emphasised, sometimes norm violation and sometimes distress. Our conceptions of what is and isn't abnormal are changing all the time. Homosexuality was regarded as a psychological abnormality until the early 70s but it wouldn't be

nowadays. Ultimately, there's no way of drawing a sharp distinction between normal and abnormal and we have to accept that in the future the way we distinguish between the two will continue to change.

- Transcript of podcast Defining Abnormality
 - Psychcast from psychotron.org.uk

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