

Psychology: Defining Abnormality

1. Deviation from a statistical norm

Here, "abnormal" means "deviating from what is usual". A norm is a standard, something which is most frequent, typical, usual or average – 95% of the population lie within two standard deviations of the mean on any measure which is normally distributed. Abnormality is thus behaviour that can be plotted on a distribution curve outside these two standard deviations.

Criticisms:

- > Many unusual behaviours, such as genius, are statistically uncommon but not undesirable. The term "abnormality" has a negative connotation.
- > Some undesirable behaviours or disorders, such as chicken pox, anxiety or depression, are *statistically* normal.
- > The question needs to be posed, "How far does one need to deviate to be considered abnormal?"

2. Social deviation

Abnormality can be defined in terms of a deviation of certain standards of social behaviour. Examples throughout history include witchcraft, homosexuality, unmarried motherhood, political opposition etc.

Criticisms:

- > What is considered a "social deviation" varies according to differing moral perspectives, and this approach allows serious abuse of individuals' rights.

3. Deviation from mental health

Doctors use the concept of physical health to measure ill-health (for example an extreme body temperature indicates illness). Jahoda suggested that we could define psychological well-being in order to recognise mental illness. The key features would be:

- Self acceptance
- Potential for growth and development
- Autonomy
- Accurate perception of reality
- Environmental competence
- Positive relationships

Criticisms:

- > Such approaches are influenced by cultural attitudes, for example autonomy is not an ideal of society.
- > The list is idealistic, and few people actually manage to achieve all of them.
- > The fundamental concepts are too vague for the purpose of diagnosis.

4. Dysfunction and distress

Certain behaviours are dysfunctional for the individual in terms of disrupting the ability to work and/or have positive relationships with people. This approach is similar to the previous as it suggests an ideal "functional" state. Hence, these behaviours are abnormal as they cause mental distress.

Criticisms:

- > The subjective experience of the individual is acknowledged when using the concepts of dysfunction and distress.
- > The diagnosis of dysfunction and distress requires judgement to be made by others, inevitably influenced by social and cultural norms.