

AQA specification for Topic 6: Psychopathology

- Definitions of abnormality, including deviation from social norms, failure to function adequately, statistical infrequency and deviation from ideal mental health.

◆ Key term

- **Psychopathology** (or abnormal psychology) is an area of psychology concerned with the scientific study of mental, emotional, and behavioural disorders in an attempt to explain, predict, and treat such behaviours. It covers a wide range of disorders such as psychotic, personality, mood, anxiety, suicide, sexual, and eating disorders.

◆ Introduction

- There have been a number of attempts to define abnormality, but none of them has been satisfactory (as you will see below). However, perhaps the best way to define abnormality is to take into consideration all four attempts and identify common features in abnormal behaviour often called the four 'D's. These are: *deviance* (unusual), *distress* (upsetting to see), *dysfunction* (inability to cope with daily activity), and *danger* (can be dangerous and harmful to oneself or others).
 - Deviation from social norms
 - Failure to function adequately
 - Statistical infrequency
 - Deviation from ideal mental health

We will now look at each definition in turn and its limitations.

◆ Deviation from social norms

- One attempt to define abnormality is when a person's behaviour **deviates from the social norms** of society. Social norms are expectations or unwritten rules of what is acceptable behaviour laid down by society. Any behaviour that deviates (violates) from the social norm will be seen as undesirable or disapproved of by society and could be considered as being abnormal.

For example, going shopping naked at your local supermarket is not seen as the normal way to behave because it deviates from society's social norms of how people should dress in the supermarket. Mental disorders, such as people with schizophrenia who display inappropriate behaviour, such as having a conversation with imaginary voices on a bus or beginning to laugh loudly at a funeral, are seen as abnormal since such behaviour is not viewed as the norm.

Weaknesses

- ✗ **Dependent on social context.** Deviation from social norms as a definition for abnormality has been criticised because whether someone is abnormal or normal can depend on the social situation in which the behaviour occurred. For example, going to the bathroom to urinate is considered normal behaviour, whereas urinating in the middle of a classroom during a psychology lesson would be seen as abnormal. This suggests that, under this definition, behaviour cannot be judged to be normal, or abnormal unless we take into account the social context it occurred in. Arguably, this not a sound basis to define abnormality as it makes abnormality a relative concept – it may or may not actually exist as it depends on the situation in which the behaviour occurred.

X Views can change over time. Another limitation is that social norms can change over time and this can determine if a behaviour is abnormal or normal. For example, take the issue of homosexuality. In America up until the 1970s, homosexuality was viewed as an abhorrent 'disease' and these views of American society were reflected by classifying it as a disorder in the diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (DSM II). However, over time, attitudes towards homosexuality changed to become more accepting and subsequently, the disorder was removed in the later 1980 edition of the manual (DSM-III) to reflect the social norms. This suggests that defining abnormality in terms of the deviation of current social norms is inappropriate because it is not reliable (inconsistent,) as it is dependent on the prevailing social norms and moral values, which can change.

X Cultural relativism. A further limitation of the deviation from social norms as a definition of abnormality is that the definition can be culturally specific. For example, the age of sexual consent in the UK is 16 years. So, an adult having sex with someone under this age would be seen as abnormal sexual behaviour (i.e. paedophilia), whereas in other cultures this would not be viewed as abnormal. In Angola, for example, the age of consent is 12 for females. This means we do not have a universal definition, as each culture has a different view of what is normal or abnormal behaviour – abnormality can vary from society to society.

◆ The failure to function adequately

- Another attempt to define abnormal behaviour is the **failure to function adequately** (FFA). An individual's behaviour would be classified as abnormal if it caused personal distress or the inability to cope with day-to-day tasks (functions). Rosenhan and Seligman (1989) identified six characteristics that demonstrate that a person is failing to cope, which all fall under the three categories of:
 - *Maladaptive* behaviour, e.g. behaviour that prevents the person from adjusting to a situation in an appropriate manner, or unpredictable behaviour.
 - *Irrational or dangerous* behaviour.
 - Behaviour that causes *personal distress or distress to others*.

For example, a person with depression may stay in bed all day, someone with social phobia may avoid social situations, and an alcoholic or drug user may be unable to hold down a job. All these examples show personal distress and maladaptive behaviour. Therefore, according to the FFA criteria, they would be considered abnormal behaviour. Or a schizophrenic may display maladaptive behaviour at a funeral service by displaying fits of laughter and causing distress to others.

Weaknesses

X Miming abnormal behaviour. A weakness of this theory is that some people who are clearly abnormal may function quite well. For example, the doctor Harold Shipman, Britain's worst serial killer, murdered at least 250 of his patients. He is classified as having an antisocial personality disorder (psychopath), yet he did not display any of the characteristics outlined by Rosenhan and Seligman.

✗ Subjective judgment. A limitation is the subjective interpretation of defining someone as failing to function adequately. Clinicians may wrongly classify people as abnormal. For example, a person who displays personal distress due to a bereavement in the family would be having a normal reaction. At what point does the suffering become abnormal personal suffering? The person may see this as part of the process of mourning, which may take longer than expected. This shows that 'functioning adequately' or 'not functioning adequately' can be difficult to diagnose because they are based on the subjective criteria of the clinicians.

✗ Cultural relativism. Another limitation of failure to function adequately as a definition of abnormality is that it is prone to cultural relativism. What is considered as 'adequate' functioning behaviour in one culture may not be considered so in another culture. For example, in Muslim cultures, women who remain completely housebound are considered normal or even virtuous. In Western cultures, such behaviour would meet some of the characteristics of FFA such as maladaptive and irrational behaviour, which can indicate mental disorder such as agoraphobia (fear of public places). This means it is difficult to establish a universal definition, as each culture has a different view of what is normal or abnormal behaviour.

◆ Statistical infrequency

- **Statistical infrequency** defines 'normal' and 'abnormal behaviour' in terms of the number of times that behaviour or trait is observed numerically (statistically). Behaviours/traits that are common can be thought of as statistically 'normal'. Behaviour that is uncommon/extremely rare is defined as abnormal – statistically infrequent. For example, about 1 in 100 people suffer from schizophrenia, which makes it statistically rare, and thus seen as an abnormality.

Strength

- ✓ **Real-life application.** A strength of statistical infrequency being used to define abnormality is that it is able to determine a clear cut-off point between what is normal and abnormal. This makes it useful for clinicians diagnosing some psychological disorders; for example, intellectual disability. When an individual's intelligence is below 70, their intellectual functioning is considered abnormal and is classified as intellectual disability.

Weaknesses

- ✗ **Desirability of infrequent behaviours.** A limitation of statistical infrequency to define abnormality is that statistical infrequency fails to account for behaviour/traits that are statistically rare but considered desirable. For example, to have a high IQ such as 130+ is rare (and therefore abnormal); however, high IQ is not a bad thing but a quality that is desirable for the majority of people – and not seen as something that requires treatment. Similarly, extremely low scores on the trait of anxiety would be desirable yet classed as abnormal. Therefore, criticism of classifying anything that differs from the majority as abnormal is that this fails to take into account the desirability of the behaviour and so it is not an effective way of diagnosing abnormality as it is reductionist (oversimplified).

✗ **Some abnormal behaviours are not statistically rare.** Another limitation of statistical infrequency is that some behaviours that are clearly regarded as abnormal are not statistically rare. For example, it is estimated that 20-30% of people will suffer from depression during their lifetime. Statistically, then, depression is relatively common, but it is not considered 'normal'.

✗ **Subjective cut-off point.** Some abnormal behaviour is not statistically rare. Another problem with defining abnormality as statistically infrequent behaviour is that the cut-off points of what is normal or abnormal are subjectively determined. For example, does someone need to be more depressed than 90% of the population, 95% of the population or 99% of the population to be diagnosed as abnormal? It is impossible to provide a clear answer to this question. This means that disagreements about cut-off points make it difficult to define abnormality in this way.

◆ Deviation from ideal mental health

- Jahoda (1958) defined abnormality as a **deviation from ideal mental health**. Jahoda identified six criteria that constitute an 'ideal' state of positive mental health. The presence of these qualities indicates psychological health and wellbeing. The more criteria someone fails to meet, the more abnormal they are in terms of mental health. The six ideal characteristics for positive mental health are:
 - Positive self-attitude:** Having a positive view of one's self is a characteristic of a mentally healthy person (e.g. has a high level of self-esteem).
 - Self-actualisation of one's potential:** Having the ability to reach and fulfil one's potential in many aspects of life (the best one can be) is healthy for a positive state of mind. Prevention of reaching one's potential can result in an unhealthy mental state.
 - Resistance to stress:** the ability to cope with stressful situations.
 - Personal autonomy:** to think and act independently, free from others.
 - Accurate perception of reality:** seeing life in a realistic way 'as it is' and not in a deluded way.
 - Adapting to the environment:** A normal person is able to adapt and adjust to changing circumstances that occur in their social environment, such as work and their personal life.

Weaknesses

✗ **Too idealistic.** A limitation is that the six characteristics of positive mental health are unrealistic as most people would find it difficult to achieve all of the six at the same time. For example, many people may never achieve 'self-actualisation' in their lives, which would suggest then that many people are psychologically unhealthy (i.e. they are abnormal). Therefore, everyone could be described as abnormal to some extent, which doesn't help determine a genuine difference between normal and abnormal.

X Cultural relativism. A limitation of deviation from ideal mental health as a definition of abnormality is that it is prone to cultural relativism. What is 'ideal' in one culture may not be in another. For example, individualistic cultures (Western cultures, e.g. UK) place greater emphasis on personal autonomy and self-actualisation, which are Western ideals. Whereas in a collectivist culture (non-Western, e.g. Asian culture), people may see this as unhealthy behaviour, as they emphasise behaviour that shows inter-dependency and collective responsibility. This means some cultures will fall short of Jahoda's criteria of ideal mental health, which may wrongly indicate abnormality when it is really different cultural values.

X Subjective criteria. Another limitation of deviation from ideal mental health to define abnormality is that some of the concepts in Jahoda's (1958) criteria are vague and difficult to measure. For example, 'accurate perception of reality' will be difficult to measure objectively. This is because 'reality' is different for each person based on their experiences. 'Reality' for a soldier who spent many years in battle will be different from the 'reality' of a middle-class mother living in the suburbs. This shows that some of the concepts are subjective judgements.

Practice exam questions

1. Explain what is meant by 'deviation from social norms' in the context of abnormality. [3 marks]
2. Give two limitations associated with 'deviation from social norms' as a definition of abnormality. [3 marks+ 3 marks]
3. Explain what is meant by 'deviation from ideal mental health' in the context of abnormality. [3 marks]
4. Give two limitations associated with 'deviation from ideal mental health' as a definition of abnormality. [3 marks+ 3 marks]
5. Explain what is meant by 'failure to function adequately' in the context of abnormality. [4 marks]
6. Give two limitations associated with 'failure to function adequately' as a definition of abnormality. [3 marks + 3 marks]
7. Explain what is meant by 'statistical infrequency' in the context of abnormality. [4 marks]
8. Give two limitations associated with 'statistical infrequency' as a definition of abnormality. [3 marks + 3 marks]
9. Fahim lives in London and has a fear of talking the underground trains as he believes he will be stuck in the underground for many days. This means he has to wake up very early, catch three buses, and walk for half an hour just to get to work, which can take up to three hours. He is consistently very late for work.
10. Give one definition of abnormality. [1 mark]
11. Use this definition to explain why Fahim's behaviour might be viewed as abnormal. [3 marks]
12. Describe and evaluate two or more definitions of abnormality. [12 marks AS, 16 marks A-level]