



Definitions of Abnormality

A. Introduction

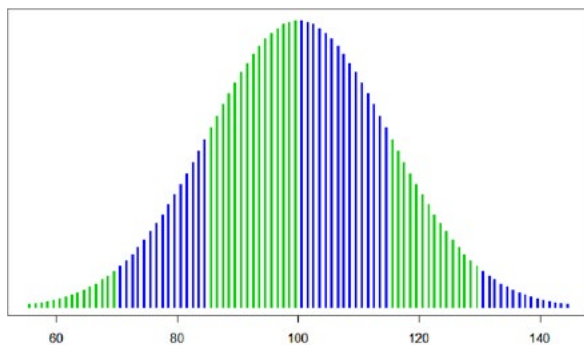
As part of your study of **psychopathology**, you will need to consider how abnormality is defined. Everyone is different, but how different does a person need to be in order to be defined as abnormal? At what point does that person require a psychological diagnosis and treatment? Often, the first stage in any psychological diagnosis is to figure out whether behaviours or symptoms are considered to be normal or abnormal. Then, on the basis of this, more tests may be given before a mental health condition, such as schizophrenia or depression, is diagnosed. This factsheet will walk you through the different ways of defining abnormality. Words highlighted in bold can be found in the glossary, and a worksheet to help you test your knowledge can be found at the end of the factsheet. There are four ways of defining abnormality and the examiner will expect you to be able to describe and evaluate each of them. These are:

- Statistical Deviation
- Failure to Function Adequately
- Deviation from Social Norms
- Deviation from Ideal Mental Health

Examiner's Tip: Make sure you learn all four definitions of abnormality as you could be asked about any of them in your examination.

B. Statistical Deviation

To answer the question of what is abnormal, the statistical deviation definition looks at the number of people within a population who have a particular trait. According to this definition, any trait that is classed as common or usual in a population is normal, whereas traits that are rarely seen within the population are classed as abnormal.



A normal distribution showing IQ scores in the general population

In order to measure statistical deviation, a **normal distribution** graph is produced. The graph shows the particular trait along the X-axis and the percentage of the population with that trait on the Y-axis. The majority of the population have an average score and are represented at the top of the distribution, however those with extremely high or low scores that have deviated from the mean are fewer in number and can be seen at the tail ends of the distribution. According to the statistical deviation definition, it is these people who are classed as abnormal.

Exam Hint: Some websites and textbooks may refer to this definition as 'Deviation from Statistical Norms'. This means the same thing as statistical deviation and is just an alternative way of saying it, so don't get confused!

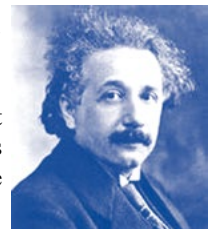
C. Evaluation

This definition has proved to be especially useful in the diagnosis of intellectual disability disorder (ID). This is a disorder characterised by a below-average IQ and a lack of functional skills. The normal distribution graph shows the plotting of the IQ of the general population. It can be seen that most people have an IQ of around 100, which is the average score on an IQ test, while very few people have extremely high or low scores. The statistical deviation definition is key in helping psychologists to diagnose ID, as the normal distribution informs whether or not a person meets the criteria for ID, which is having an IQ score of less than 70. This shows that this definition has good practical value.

The judgements made about abnormality from this definition are objective and based on quantitative data analysis. Again, looking at the example of IDD, individuals receive a diagnosis on the basis of a standardised test, which has been quantitatively analysed. Their scores are then compared with others on the same measure. It could be argued that this is a much fairer way of judging abnormality due to its objectivity and the fact that data is statistically analysed.

However, this definition fails to take into account the desirability of behaviour. Just because behaviour is statistically rare, doesn't necessarily mean that it is abnormal or undesirable. For example, take those with an IQ of over 130; this is statistically unusual but is typically seen as a desirable trait. As this definition fails to take this into account, it suggests that this definition alone should not be used to make a judgement about abnormality.

Einstein was estimated to have an IQ of 160. Should he be classed as abnormal?



Statistical deviation also fails to take into account individual differences. Not everyone who is classed as being statistically rare should be considered to be abnormal.

If a person has an IQ below 70, yet is able to function well in their everyday life, then it may not be necessary to classify this person as being 'abnormal'.

The point at which behaviour is classed as rare is also debatable. To a certain extent, this is subjective as someone has to decide on the boundaries between normality and abnormality. Additionally, these boundaries could be considered to be arbitrary-is there really any difference between a person with an IQ of 69 who is classed as abnormal or a person with an IQ of 71 who is classed as normal? Again, this limits the usefulness of this definition.

Finally, Hassett and White (1989) argue that this definition cannot be used to diagnose abnormality, as some atypical traits are quite common. According to research conducted by Mind, the Mental Health Charity (2009), nearly 10% of people suffer from mixed anxiety and depression at some point in their lives. This is an example of abnormal behaviour, which isn't statistically rare. This suggests that this definition of abnormality is of limited use.

Exam Hint: You also need to know about normal distributions as part of your study of 'Research Methods' so it is worth learning about them in detail!

D. Failure to Function Adequately

The failure to function adequately definition of abnormality suggests that a person should be classed as abnormal at the point that they are no longer able to function in their everyday lives. Using the continued example of ID, it can be seen how this definition can be used to define abnormality. For example, if an individual has an IQ of below 70 and is able to live their life without any problem, this definition would argue that they don't need to be judged as abnormal. However, if this person is unable to look after themselves, maintain healthy relationships or continue their working life, then their behaviour should be considered abnormal. Rosenhan and Seligman (1989) suggested that there were several criteria of failing to function adequately:

- Suffering and personal distress,
- Irrational beliefs,
- Maladaptive, impulsive, and dangerous behaviour (to themselves and/or others),
- Inability to keep basic standards of hygiene and nutrition,
- Unable to conform to **social norms**,
- Inability to cope with new situations, cope at work, or maintain personal relationships,
- Cause other people discomfort due to their lifestyle.



Failing to keep basic standards of hygiene is a key aspect of the failure to function definition.

In order to assess how well people function in their everyday life, psychologists often use the **Global Assessment of Functioning Scale (GAF)**. This is a questionnaire that assesses an individual's ability to function psychologically, socially, and occupationally. The questionnaire consists of several descriptive statements that align with numbers: psychologists complete the questionnaire alongside patients and select the statements that are most applicable to the patient. They are then given a score out of 100 and are placed onto a continuum. Patients rated as 0 are deemed to be severely impaired whilst patients scoring 100 are said to have superior functioning.

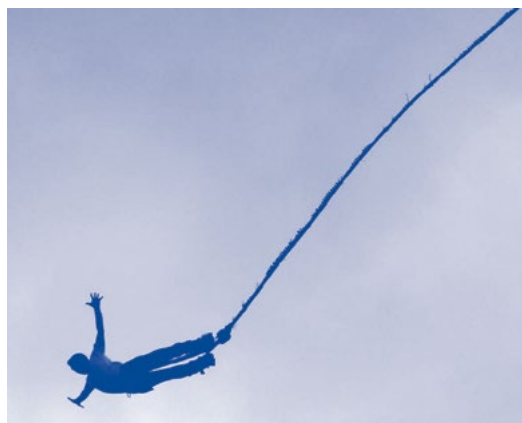
E. Evaluation

One of the strengths of this definition is that it does take into account individual differences, as it analyses each patient individually before considering whether behaviour is abnormal. It is therefore a more useful definition of abnormality as each individual's experiences are taken into account.

One of the benefits of using the global assessment of functioning scale is that it could be considered to be an objective way of measuring a person's ability to function as all psychologists use the

same standardised measurement to assess all patients. However, as different psychologists would rate each patient as to how well they are functioning, judgements are still subjective and so could lack **inter-rater reliability**, which is a limitation.

The failure to function adequately definition is also criticised for being too inclusive. This means that there might be more people rated as abnormal than should be using this definition. One of the criteria of failing to function is maladaptive and dangerous behaviour. Under this criteria, people who take part in bungee jumping and sky diving, amongst other extreme sports, could be classed as failing to function adequately, despite living a perfectly normal life otherwise. Additionally, some people may be classed as abnormal if they are unable to keep basic standards of hygiene or nutrition. According to government statistics, 12.9 million people in the U.K. were judged to be in absolute poverty (2014/2015), is it fair to classify these people as abnormal? This definition runs the risk of highlighting people as abnormal when in fact they aren't, limiting the usefulness of this definition in defining abnormality.



Should taking part in extreme sports be classified as abnormal?

Exam Hint: You will gain more marks in essays if you write fewer evaluation points but discuss them in more detail. In your evaluation make sure to clearly state a strength or limitation, then explain it fully.

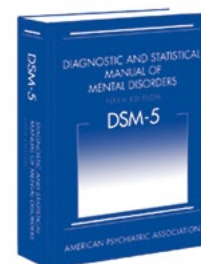
F. Deviation from Social Norms

The deviation from social norms definition analyses **social norms**. These are the spoken or unspoken rules and laws within a society. According to this definition, anyone who deviates from these norms should be classified as abnormal. In considering this, it is important to note how important the norm is within a particular culture and the extent to which the norm has been violated before making a judgement.

The DSM, currently in its fifth edition.

A good example to explain this is the condition antisocial personality disorder (APD), which is sometimes more commonly referred to as 'psychopathy'. According to the **Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)**, people with antisocial personality disorder have 'an absence of prosocial internal standards associated with failure to conform to lawful or culturally normative ethical behaviour.'

Put simply, it suggests that any person who has no regard for other people and/or who fails to comply with society's rules, meets the antisocial personality disorder criteria. Of course, there are other factors involved in the diagnosis of APD, but this demonstrates how deviation



DSM-5
2013

from social norms could be a useful tool in helping to diagnose mental health conditions such as APD.

Exam Hint: Use examples in your writing to explain the different definitions of abnormality, but try to keep them brief. Make sure you use the example to focus on the actual definition.

G. Evaluation

This is a useful definition as it takes into account how desirable a behaviour is. As intelligence is a desirable social norm, under this definition a person would not be classed as abnormal if they had a high IQ score.

However, social norms often change over time, what was once seen to be acceptable could now be considered unacceptable and vice versa. Until 1974, homosexuality was listed in the DSM as a psychological disorder; it was only after people started to gain a greater understanding that this was revised. As social norms can change over time, any diagnosis of abnormality made under this definition lacks **temporal validity**, meaning it may be considered abnormal at the point of diagnosis, but may not be considered to be abnormal at a later date.

Another limitation is that norms are specific to each individual culture; what may be classed as abnormal in one culture, may not be classed as abnormal in another. Again, homosexuality illustrates this point well; in most Western countries, this is now seen to be a normal behaviour. Whilst England brought in a law to legalise same sex marriages in 2014, a few countries, including Iran and Saudi Arabia still maintain laws which could sentence people to death for engaging in homosexual behaviour. This is known as **cultural relativism**, and limits the usefulness of this definition in defining abnormality as it can only be used within an individual's own culture.

Finally, too much reliance on this idea of deviating from social norms could lead to the abuse of people's civil rights. For example, in the Nazi regime, anyone going against the desirable Aryan social norm, most commonly those of the Jewish faith, disabled, and homosexual people, were taken to concentration camps, prior to the holocaust. Some argue that relying too heavily on this definition takes away an individual's right to be different, which could then result in undesirable consequences.



Auschwitz concentration camp. Does judging by social norms cause civil rights abuses?

Exam Hint: One way to improve your writing is to compare and contrast between different definitions of abnormality in your essays. This could be a highly effective way of gaining those all-important discussion marks!

H. Deviation from Ideal Mental Health

This final definition is different from the previous three, as instead of considering what is abnormal behaviour, it considers first what is normal behaviour and suggests that anything deviating from this is abnormal. Jahoda (1958) was the first to try and define ideal mental health. She suggested that a person has ideal mental health if they have the following traits:

- A positive view of themselves and good **self-esteem**,

- The ability to be rational and see themselves accurately,
- The ability to **self-actualise**,
- Good coping mechanisms for stress,
- Independence,
- Positive relationships with other people,
- The ability to meet the demands of everyday life.

Jahoda argued that those who do not meet this criteria can therefore be classed as abnormal.



Maintaining good relationships is a key criteria of ideal mental health.

Exam Hint: It may appear that the Failing to Function Adequately and Deviation from Ideal Mental Health definitions overlap. However, you could examine failing to function as an example of being unable to cope with the demands of work, whereas deviation from ideal mental health interprets it as the inability to be successful in work.

I. Evaluation

This definition is very thorough. It considers a wide range of factors in the consideration of what is normal or abnormal and it could therefore be argued that this is a useful way of diagnosing mental health conditions.

However, the comprehensiveness of this definition is also a limitation as some have argued that it sets an unachievable standard for mental health. There are so many criteria, that it seems impossible that an individual could meet all of the different criteria for a prolonged period of time. This again brings about the problem that this definition is too inclusive, meaning more people would be judged as abnormal than who actually are.

This definition is also subjective as who makes the decision that a person is failing to meet Jahoda's standard of ideal mental health? Different psychologists could have different opinions, therefore meaning that any judgements made about abnormality could be biased and lacking in inter-rater reliability.

This definition also cannot be used across different cultures. Whilst characteristics such as independence and self-actualisation are valued in individualist countries such as the U.K. and America, more collectivist cultures, such as Japan and China, would argue that a focus on independence is selfish. These cultures believe in community values and social interaction and see independence as being abnormal. This shows Jahoda's definition lacks generalisability and is unable to be used globally.

Exam Hint: Questions about definitions of abnormality are very often 'stem' questions, and typically outline a case study of an individual. They often ask you to use your knowledge of definitions to explain why that person is normal or abnormal. In your response, make sure that you read the stem carefully and use the information given to help you to form your answer.

J. Conclusion

The different definitions of abnormality, despite their various strengths and limitations, all have their place in psychopathology and all contribute to helping to figure out whether a person's behaviour can be labelled as normal or abnormal.

