

An Exploration of Abnormal Psychology and Mental Illness

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ABSTRACT

Abnormal psychology constitutes a specialized branch within the field of psychology, concentrating on comprehending, diagnosing, and treating mental disorders. It delves into aberrant thoughts, behaviors, and emotions that veer from conventional social norms. Mental disorders, pervasive in society, substantially influence an individual's well-being. A profound grasp of abnormal psychology is indispensable for formulating efficacious treatment regimens and extending support to individuals grappling with mental health challenges. At the heart of abnormal psychology lies the pivotal concept of abnormality. This notion encapsulates deviations from customary or average thoughts, behaviors, and emotional patterns. However, discerning what qualifies as abnormal is inherently subjective and liable to fluctuate across diverse cultures and historical epochs. A poignant illustration of this variability is evident in the evolving perception of depression. Once stigmatized as a sign of personal inadequacy, depression is now universally acknowledged as a grave medical condition warranting empathetic understanding and professional intervention.

Keywords: *Abnormal Psychology, Organic Mental Disorder, Mental Illness, Psychotherapy*

Abnormality is crucial in various fields, from psychology to sociology, as it sheds light on behaviors or traits that deviate from what is considered typical or expected within a given context. As delineated by the Collins Dictionary, the definition of abnormality encompasses a broad spectrum of characteristics, encompassing physical and behavioral attributes, which may raise concerns due to their unusualness or potential hazards (Collins Dictionary, n.d.). In academic discourse, abnormality is often explored through various frameworks, including statistical infrequency, deviation from social norms, failure to function adequately, and deviation from ideal mental health (McLeod, 2018).

One of the primary ways of conceptualizing abnormality is through statistical infrequency, which revolves around the rarity or statistical uncommonness of specific mental or behavioral patterns within a given population. Merriam-Webster defines statistics as "the science dealing with the collection, analysis, interpretation, and presentation of numerical data" (Merriam-Webster, p. 44). When applied to abnormality, statistical infrequency refers to the infrequent occurrence of a particular trait among a specific group, thereby categorizing it as abnormal (McLeod, 2018).

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For instance, consider IQ scores, a commonly used metric to assess cognitive abilities. In a typical distribution, most of the population falls within a certain range of IQ scores. Those scoring significantly below or above this range are considered statistically abnormal (Willard, n.d.). However, it is essential to recognize that being labeled abnormal based on statistical measures does not inherently imply negativity. For instance, individuals with exceptionally high IQ scores are considered abnormally intelligent, a trait often viewed positively in many contexts.

The statistical approach offers utility by providing a quantitative framework for delineating normalcy and abnormality, thereby aiding in establishing diagnostic criteria (McLeod, 2018). However, it falls short in distinguishing between behaviors deemed "desirable" or "undesirable." For example, while obesity may be statistically normal within a population, it does not necessarily correlate with health or desirability. Conversely, a high IQ, though statistically abnormal, is often viewed favorably due to its association with intelligence and success (McLeod, 2018). This highlights the complexity of interpreting abnormality solely through statistical measures.

Statistical Infrequency

Despite its utility, the statistical infrequency model has limitations and inconsistencies. For instance, prevalent conditions like depression, which affects approximately 25% of the population at some point in their lives, would be considered normal under the rubric of statistical infrequency, thereby undermining its applicability (Willard, n.d.). This discrepancy underscores the need to explore alternative definitions of abnormality that account for the multifaceted nature of human behavior and experience.

Another perspective on abnormality is a deviation from social norms, which considers behaviors or traits that violate societal expectations or cultural norms within a particular context. Society establishes norms, or implicit rules of behavior, based on shared values, beliefs, and customs. Deviation from these norms is often perceived as abnormal and may elicit social sanctions or stigmatization (McLeod, 2018).

For example, consider the social norm regarding personal space. In many Western cultures, maintaining a certain distance between individuals during interactions is considered polite and respectful. Deviating significantly from this norm, such as standing too close to someone during a conversation, may be perceived as abnormal behavior and could lead to discomfort or social disapproval.

The deviation from the social norms model provides valuable insights into how societal expectations shape our understanding of abnormality. However, it is essential to recognize that social norms vary across cultures and contexts, and what may be considered abnormal in one setting could be entirely acceptable in another. Moreover, societal norms evolve, reflecting changes in values, attitudes, and social dynamics, further complicating the assessment of abnormal behavior solely based on deviation from social norms.

Furthermore, the failure to function adequately model defines abnormality in terms of an individual's inability to meet basic functional requirements for daily living. This perspective emphasizes the practical consequences of abnormal behavior, such as the inability to maintain employment, establish interpersonal relationships, or engage in self-care activities (McLeod, 2018).

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For instance, consider a person experiencing severe depression to the extent that they struggle to get out of bed, perform routine tasks, or interact with others. From the perspective of failure to function adequately, this behavior would be considered abnormal because it impairs the individual's ability to fulfill essential responsibilities and lead a functional life.

Unlike the previous models, the failure to function adequately approach focuses on the observable and tangible consequences of abnormal behavior rather than relying solely on statistical or societal criteria. However, it may overlook internal experiences and subjective distress associated with mental health conditions, which are integral aspects of the human experience.

Lastly, the deviation from the ideal mental health model defines abnormality in terms of deviation from an optimal state of psychological well-being. Developed by Jahoda (1958), this model identifies several criteria for ideal mental health, including positive attitudes toward oneself, growth, autonomy, integration, and an accurate perception of reality (McLeod, 2018).

From this perspective, abnormality is characterized by the absence or impairment of these positive attributes, such as low self-esteem, stagnation, dependence, fragmentation, and distorted perceptions of reality. However, it's essential to recognize that ideal mental health is culturally and contextually bound, and what may be considered psychologically healthy in one culture may differ from another.

Deviation from Social Norms

The concept of deviation from social norms is fundamental to understanding abnormal behavior within various cultural contexts. It refers to behaviors or traits outside the accepted standards or practices within a specific social or cultural group (Willard, n.d.). This definition underscores the importance of cultural relativism in assessing what is considered normal or abnormal.

A notable example of deviation from social norms can be observed in the realm of table etiquette. In Western cultures like America and Jamaica, it is customary to use utensils while eating, emphasizing notions of cleanliness and manners. Conversely, in some regions of Africa and Asia, eating with one's hands is accepted and often preferred, reflecting cultural traditions and practices. Therefore, an individual using utensils in a context where hand-eating is the norm might be perceived as deviating from social norms and thus labeled as abnormal.

However, it is crucial to recognize that what is deemed abnormal in one cultural context may be entirely normal in another. Cultural norms vary widely and are shaped by historical, geographical, and social factors. For example, while tattoos may be considered taboo in some cultures, they hold significant cultural and religious significance in others. Thus, assessing abnormality based on deviation from social norms requires a nuanced understanding of cultural diversity and context.

Moreover, the significance attached to a particular social norm within a culture influence whether deviation from it is considered abnormal. Practices deeply ingrained in cultural identity are more likely to be considered essential markers of normalcy. Conversely, behaviors or customs peripheral to a culture may not carry the same weight in defining

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abnormality. For instance, a person wearing mismatched socks may be perceived as eccentric in some social circles but not necessarily abnormal, as the behavior does not violate core social norms.

Failure to Function Adequately

The failure to function adequately model provides another lens through which abnormal behavior can be understood. It posits that abnormality is characterized by an individual's inability to function effectively in various aspects of life, such as maintaining employment, sustaining relationships, and meeting daily responsibilities (Katie, n.d.). This model emphasizes the practical consequences of abnormal behavior, focusing on its impact on the individual and those around them.

Rosenhan and Seligman identified five key characteristics associated with failure to function adequately: personal distress, observer distress, maladaptive behavior, unpredictable behavior, and irrational behavior. Personal distress refers to the individual experiencing significant emotional turmoil, such as anxiety or helplessness. Observer distress occurs when the individual's behavior causes distress or discomfort to those around them.

Maladaptive behavior involves actions that hinder the individual's ability to lead a normal life, such as avoiding social interactions due to intense fear. Unpredictable behavior encompasses actions that deviate from expected norms or are inconsistent with the individual's usual behavior patterns. Finally, irrational behavior refers to actions that are not comprehensible to others and lack logical or rational explanations.

However, this definition of abnormality has its limitations. It may fail to capture the complexity of human behavior and the subjective nature of distress. For example, while many individuals experience personal distress at various points in their lives, not all exhibit maladaptive behaviors or struggle to function adequately. Moreover, external factors, such as socioeconomic status or cultural background, can significantly influence an individual's ability to function effectively. For instance, a person who loses their job due to economic downturns may experience distress and struggle to meet their financial obligations, but this does not necessarily indicate underlying psychological abnormalities.

Furthermore, the failure to function adequately model may pathologize normal variations in behavior and emotion. For example, feelings of sadness or anxiety are common human experiences. Still, within this framework, they may be interpreted as signs of abnormality if they lead to personal distress or impaired functioning. This highlights the importance of considering context and individual differences when assessing abnormal behavior.

Deviation from Ideal Mental Health

The concept of deviation from ideal mental health offers a distinct perspective on abnormality by examining how individuals align with criteria deemed indicative of optimal psychological well-being. Developed by Jahoda (1958), this approach identifies six key characteristics associated with ideal mental health: positive self-view, capacity for growth and development, autonomy and independence, accurate perception of reality, positive interpersonal relationships, and environmental mastery—the ability to effectively navigate the demands of daily life (McLeod, August 18, 2018).

According to this definition, individuals who fail to meet these criteria to a significant degree are considered to deviate from the ideal standard of mental health and may be labeled

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as abnormal. However, it is important to note that not all criteria need to be met, and the presence of multiple characteristics contributes to a healthier or "normal" psychological profile (McLeod, August 18, 2018).

Despite its theoretical appeal, the deviation from the ideal mental health model has faced criticism for its stringent criteria and potential for producing problematic results. Maslow (1968) highlighted that only a minority of individuals ever achieve the pinnacle of "self-actualization," suggesting that the standards set by Jahoda may be too high and unrealistic for the majority of the population (Katie, n.d.). This raises the concern that if most individuals are unable to meet the criteria for ideal mental health, they would be classified as abnormal. However, if a large portion of the population is deemed abnormal by these criteria, it paradoxically becomes the norm due to its prevalence (Katie, n.d.).

Moreover, the subjective nature of determining the number of characteristics required to classify an individual as "normal" or "abnormal" introduces further complications. Each person may interpret and prioritize these characteristics differently, leading to inconsistencies in classification and diminishing the reliability and validity of the method (Katie, n.d.).

In light of these challenges, it becomes evident that abnormality is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon that any single characteristic or set of criteria cannot adequately capture. Psychologists often adopt a holistic approach, considering multiple factors and dimensions of behavior, cognition, and emotion to understand abnormality and provide accurate diagnoses comprehensively.

By integrating insights from multiple models, including deviation from ideal mental health, alongside other frameworks, such as statistical infrequency, deviation from social norms, and failure to function adequately, psychologists can develop a more nuanced and holistic understanding of abnormal behavior. This comprehensive approach acknowledges human psychology's and behavior's inherent complexity, allowing for more accurate assessment and intervention strategies tailored to individual needs.

Organic Mental Disorders

Organic Mental Disorders represent a significant challenge within the realm of mental health, characterized by disruptions in cognitive or behavioral functioning resulting from underlying physical or medical conditions rather than primary psychiatric illnesses. Despite being a prevalent occurrence globally, there remains a considerable gap in understanding the multifaceted nature of these disorders, including their various types, underlying causes, and profound impact on individuals' lives.

As defined by Pramod Kerkar (April 6, 2017), Organic Mental Disorders encompass conditions where mental functioning deteriorates due to physiological or medical factors rather than psychological origins. This distinction is crucial, as it underscores the organic nature of these disorders, which may stem from diverse etiological factors ranging from traumatic brain injuries to chemical imbalances and genetic predispositions.

Organic Mental Disorders can manifest in a myriad of ways, ranging from temporary cognitive impairments to chronic, debilitating conditions. Ann Logsdon (July 18, 2018) notes that the severity and duration of these disorders can vary significantly, influencing

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individuals' abilities to perform daily tasks, maintain social relationships, and achieve overall well-being.

Causes of Organic Mental Disorders

Understanding the causes of Organic Mental Disorders is essential for accurate diagnosis and targeted intervention strategies. These disorders can arise from many factors, each contributing to brain function and cognitive processing disruptions.

Physical Trauma: Traumatic brain injuries resulting from severe blows to the head, strokes, or other physical traumas can lead to structural damage or alterations in brain function, precipitating Organic Mental Disorders. Such injuries may affect various cognitive domains, including memory, attention, and executive functioning.

Chemical and Toxic Exposures: Exposure to harmful chemicals or toxins, whether through environmental pollutants or substance abuse, can profoundly affect brain chemistry and function. Chemical imbalances resulting from such exposures can contribute to the development of Organic Mental Disorders, including mood disorders, psychosis, and cognitive impairments.

Genetic Predispositions: Genetic factors play a significant role in predisposing individuals to certain Organic Mental Disorders. Inherited vulnerabilities may make individuals susceptible to infections, neurodegenerative diseases, or biochemical imbalances that disrupt normal brain function.

Psychosocial Factors: Beyond purely biological causes, psychosocial factors such as severe deprivation, physical or mental abuse, and extreme psychological trauma can also contribute to the development of Organic Mental Disorders. Chronic stressors or adverse life events may exacerbate underlying vulnerabilities, exacerbating symptoms and impairing overall functioning.

Types of Organic Mental Disorders

Organic Mental Disorders encompass a broad spectrum of conditions, each characterized by distinct clinical features, etiological factors, and prognoses. Understanding the various types of Organic Mental Disorders is essential for accurate diagnosis and tailored treatment approaches.

- **Organic Anxiety Disorder:** Organic Anxiety Disorder involves disruptions in brain chemistry, resulting in abnormal levels of neurotransmitters that contribute to excessive worry and anxiety. Individuals with this disorder may experience heightened levels of apprehension and fear, often over situations that do not warrant such intense mental focus. Unlike primary anxiety disorders, the underlying causes of Organic Anxiety Disorder are physical rather than psychological.
- **Organic Catatonic Disorder:** Organic Catatonic Disorder manifests as impairments in motor skills, affecting individuals' ability to initiate and control movements. This disorder is characterized by episodes of catatonia, wherein individuals may exhibit rigid posturing, stupor, or unusual motor behaviors. Chemical imbalances in the brain contribute to these motor disturbances, which can be triggered by various factors depending on the individual's circumstances.
- **Organic Delusional Disorder:** Organic Delusional Disorder involves the presence of fixed, false beliefs or delusions that are not based on reality. Individuals with this

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disorder may hold extreme or exaggerated beliefs about themselves, others, or the world around them. These delusions can significantly impact individuals' perceptions and behaviors, disrupting social and occupational functioning.

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Implications and Treatment Approach

The profound impact of Organic Mental Disorders on individuals' lives underscores the importance of accurate diagnosis and targeted intervention strategies. Effective treatment approaches often require a multidisciplinary approach, incorporating medical, psychological, and psychosocial interventions to address the complex interplay of biological, psychological, and social factors contributing to these disorders.

- **Medical Interventions:** Pharmacological treatments addressing underlying biochemical imbalances or neurological abnormalities are often a cornerstone of treatment for Organic Mental Disorders. Medications targeting specific neurotransmitter systems, such as serotonin or dopamine, may help alleviate symptoms and improve overall functioning in individuals with these disorders.
- **Psychotherapy:** Psychotherapeutic interventions, including cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), supportive therapy, and psychoeducation, can be invaluable in helping individuals cope with the emotional and psychological challenges associated with Organic Mental Disorders. These approaches help individuals develop adaptive coping strategies, improve insight into their condition, and enhance overall quality of life.
- **Psychosocial Support:** Psychosocial interventions, including social support networks, vocational rehabilitation, and community-based services, play a crucial role in supporting individuals with Organic Mental Disorders. These interventions address the broader social and environmental factors influencing individuals' functioning and promote their integration into the community.

Mental Illness

Another pivotal facet of abnormal psychology revolves around the classification of mental disorders. In the United States, mental health professionals rely on the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) as the primary classification system. This comprehensive manual furnishes an exhaustive inventory of mental disorders along with their respective symptoms, facilitating precise diagnoses. Regularly updated to reflect advancements in the understanding of mental illness, the DSM serves as an indispensable tool for clinicians navigating the complex landscape of psychiatric conditions.

A fundamental challenge in abnormal psychology lies in differentiating between normal and abnormal behavior. This distinction often rests on a delicate balance, influenced by many factors. Genetic predispositions, variations in brain chemistry, and environmental influences all contribute to the development of mental disorders. Thus, grasping the intricate interplay among these factors assumes paramount importance in the diagnosis and treatment of mental illness.

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Treatment modalities for mental disorders typically encompass a multifaceted approach, incorporating psychotherapy, medication, and lifestyle modifications. Psychotherapy, commonly known as talk therapy, entails engaging in discussions with a mental health professional to explore thoughts, emotions, and experiences. Medication plays a crucial role in regulating brain chemistry and alleviating symptoms, complementing psychotherapeutic interventions. Moreover, lifestyle changes such as regular exercise and a nutritious diet can positively impact mental health outcomes.

Abnormal psychology constitutes a crucial and multifaceted discipline aimed at comprehending and addressing mental disorders. With its expansive scope encompassing a diverse array of conditions, abnormal psychology furnishes a framework for diagnosing and treating mental illness. By continually advancing research and fostering a deeper understanding of mental health, we can endeavor to enhance the well-being of individuals grappling with mental illness.

Mental illness constitutes a pervasive and frequently misunderstood phenomenon affecting millions worldwide. Spanning a broad spectrum of disorders, mental illness encompasses disturbances in thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Ranging from milder conditions such as anxiety and depression to more severe disorders like schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, mental illness presents a formidable challenge for individuals and society at large.

A significant impediment to addressing mental illness is the persistent stigma surrounding it. Despite strides in destigmatizing mental health issues, misconceptions persist, relegating mental illness to the realm of personal weakness or moral failure. This stigma often impedes individuals from seeking help, exacerbating feelings of shame and isolation. It is imperative to recognize mental illness as a bona fide medical condition warranting empathy, understanding, and appropriate treatment.

Moreover, the dearth of resources and inadequate access to mental health care pose substantial barriers to effective intervention. Underfunded mental health services and limited access to care to thwart timely diagnosis and treatment, adversely impacting individuals' quality of life. Diagnosing mental illness is an intricate process requiring meticulous evaluation by mental health professionals utilizing standardized assessment tools like the DSM.

CONCLUSION

Treatment for mental illness typically involves a multifaceted approach comprising psychotherapy, medication, and lifestyle modifications. Psychotherapy, commonly referred to as talk therapy, entails engaging in conversations with a trained mental health professional to explore thoughts, emotions, and experiences. This therapeutic modality enables individuals to gain insight into their mental health challenges, develop coping strategies, and cultivate resilience.

Medication serves as another cornerstone of mental health treatment, aiding in the regulation of brain chemistry and ameliorating symptoms associated with various psychiatric disorders. Pharmacological interventions target specific neurotransmitter systems implicated in mood regulation, anxiety, psychosis, and other symptoms, thereby enhancing overall functioning and well-being.

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In addition to psychotherapy and medication, lifestyle changes play a pivotal role in promoting mental health and mitigating the impact of mental illness. Regular exercise, balanced nutrition, adequate sleep, and stress management techniques are integral to a holistic approach to mental wellness. These lifestyle modifications bolster emotional resilience and contribute to overall physical health and vitality.

Importantly, seeking help is paramount for individuals experiencing symptoms of mental illness. Mental health issues are an intrinsic aspect of overall health, and early intervention can significantly improve quality of life and functioning. Encouragingly, accessing evidence-based treatment and support services can empower individuals to navigate their mental health challenges effectively and enhance their overall well-being.

Furthermore, it is crucial to foster a supportive and inclusive environment for individuals living with mental illness. This entails advocating for increased access to mental health care, combating stigma through education and awareness initiatives, and promoting community empathy and understanding. By reducing societal barriers and fostering acceptance, we can create a more compassionate and equitable society for all individuals affected by mental illness.

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Conflict of Interest

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