Abnormal Psychology

Introduction

There are four criteria for defining abnormality, each with strengths and weaknesses : deviation from social norms, failure to function adequately, deviation from ideal mental health, and statistical infrequency defintions of abnormality.

The specification says …

Definitions of abnormality: including statistical infrequency and deviation from social norms.

This unit is concerned with psychopathology,which is the study of psychological disorder – *psycho* for psychological and *pathology*, which means the study of the causes of diseases.
How can we decide if a person's behaviour and/or psychological state are sufficiently unusual (i.e.abnormal) to justify diagnosing and treating them for a psychological disorder? On this spread we consider two methods used to make this decision: statistical infrequency and deviation from social norms.

Key terms

Abnormality- a psychological or behavioral state leading to impairement of interpersonal and/ or distress to others.

Statistical infrequency – Occurs when an individual has a less common characteristic, for example being more depressed or less intelligent than most of the population.

Deviation from social norms

Statistical infrequency

Perhaps the most obvious way to define anything as 'normal' or 'abnormal' is according to the number of times we observe it – **statistics** are about numbers. According to the statistical definition any relatively *usual* behaviour or characteristic can be thought of as 'normal', and any behaviour that is different to this is 'abnormal'. This is what is meant by **statistical infrequency**. We can, for example, say that at any one time only a small number of people will have an irrational fear of buttons or believe for no good reason that their neighbours are zombies.

Example: IQ and intellectual disability disorder

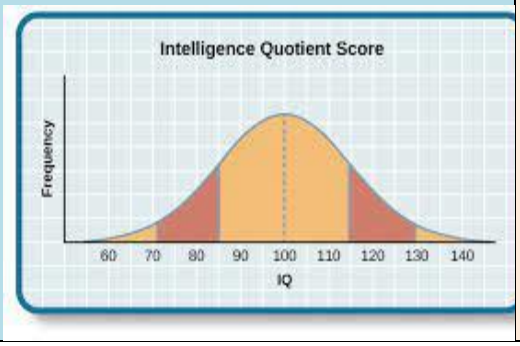
This statistical approach comes into its own when we are dealing with characteristics that can be reliably measured, for example intelligence. We know that, in any human characteristic, the majority of people's scores will cluster around the average, and that the further we go above or below that average, the fewer people will attain that score.
This is called the **normal distribution**. You can see the normal distribution of **IQ** (in the drawing below left).
The average IQ is set at 100. Most people (68%) have an IQ in the range from 85 to 115. Only 2% of people have a score below 70. Those individuals scoring below 70 are very unusual or 'abnormal', and are liable to receive a diagnosis of a psychological disorder – **intellectual disability disorder** (what used to be known as mental retardation).

Deviation from social norms

Most of us notice people whose behaviour is a **deviation from social norms**, i.e. when a person behaves in a way that is different from how we expect people to behave.
Groups of people (hence 'social') choose to define behaviour as abnormal on the basis that it offends their sense of what is 'acceptable' or the **norm**. We are making a collective judgement as a society about what is right.

Norms are specific to the culture we live in

Of course those social norms may be different for each generation and every culture, so there are relatively few behaviours that would be considered *universally* abnormal on the

definition– that behaviours violating accepted social rules are abnormal. failure to function adequately **definition**–that abnormality concerns an abillity to cope with day-to- day living. Deviation from ideal mental health definition-that abnormality concerns a failure to meet criteria for perfect psychological well-being.  	basis that they breach **social norms**. **Example: antisocial personality disorder** A person with **antisocial personality disorder** (psychopathy) is impulsive, aggressive and irresponsible. According to the **DSM-5** (the manual used by psychiatrists to diagnose mental disorder) one important symptom of antisocial personality disorder is an 'absence of **prosocial** internal standards associated with failure to conform to lawful or culturally normative ethical behaviour'. In other words we are making the social judgement that a psychopath is abnormal because they don't conform to our moral standards. Psychopathic behaviour would be considered abnormal in a very wide range of cultures.

Activity :

Human characteristics are normally distributed, with most people clustering around the **mean** and small numbers of people at the extremes.

Amanda is referred to a clinical psychologist for poor social skills. The psychologist assesses her and shows her where her skills fall on the normal distribution. The mean score on this test is 50. Amanda scores 21.SD standards for standard deviation.

About 68% of the population lies between +1 and –1 SD.About 95% of the population lies between +2 and –2 SD.

Questions

1. Estimate where Amanda's social skills fall in the population.
2. Based on this statistical distribution should Amanda be considered abnormal?

Explain your answer.