

In Quest of the Meaning of Normal and Abnormal Behavior

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Introduction

Abnormal is a word which brings a tremendous range of reactions from people. Though used extensively in denoting various types of behaviors, the word itself has as many meanings and connotations as the behavior it seeks to define. Throughout history it has been used to mean different things at different times. Christ would be classified as abnormal along with Mohammed and other religious figures, yet billions of people worship these figures. While on the other hand, a dirty, long-haired, half-naked man preaching on a street corner is considered an abnormal freak.

A Jew-loving Nazi is abnormal, just as a Jew-killing Nazi is abnormal; or they are considered that way by some, yet to others they are perfectly normal. A seven foot NBA player is considered great, while a seven foot clumsy tenth grader is abnormal and laughed at by his peers. Due to this wide and sometimes ambiguous definition of abnormal, this paper will attempt to look at the definition of the word and develop or speculate on some possible problems of this ambiguity. Three broad types of abnormality are present in the world; mental, physical, and cultural. However, because cultural and mental abnormalities are somewhat interwoven, they will not be looked at separately. Furthermore, physical abnormality is also culturally biased so cultural implications must be considered in dealing with it. Therefore, in order to do this, a look at what has been considered abnormal in the past and causes of abnormality must be looked into.

Historical Review of Causes

Throughout history people have been faced with abnormality and have sought explanations for it. Three broad categories have been developed which have come in and out of favor throughout the history of man. These are the supernatural, the biological, and the psychological traditions. All of these at one time in history had their proponents.

The supernatural tradition has been in existence since the earliest recorded history of man. Anthropologists believe this was so even in the Stone Age. And the earliest written accounts are from Hammurabi. The written accounts from Hammurabi show that the causes of maladaptive behavior were supernatural in nature. Though eventually Plato, Hippocrates and others put forward the psychology and biological points of view, they were not given much credibility for over fifteen centuries. Along with this, many scholars such as Plato still put tremendous emphasis on the supernatural. Plato went so far as to develop a scheme by which divine or supernatural madness was divided into four categories: prophetic, religious, poetic and erotic. Passages in the Old and New Testaments put forward the idea that deviant behavior is brought about by an individual being possessed by the devil. This combined with the tremendous power of the church combined to bring about one of the saddest periods in the history of man: the exorcisms and witch hunts of the dark ages. During this period, the concern and care which had previously been shown to people, showing signs of maladaptive behavior, turned into savage and vicious efforts to save their souls at the expense of their physical bodies. Even today, the taintness and stigma attached to these people by the church remains. Until this these people were just considered different, but thanks to the church the idea something was wrong with them was firmly planted in peoples' minds.

During the Renaissance, belief in supernatural causes declined rapidly, yet in 1672 dozens of people were killed in the Salem witch hunts and to this day movies such as “The Exorcist” put the thought in the public’s mind that people who are odd are also evil or bad in nature. (Alexander and Selesnick, 1966).

Developing during the time supernatural tradition held prominence was the biological tradition. The basic founders of this school were naturalists who believed in the basic assumption that all events have natural as opposed to supernatural causes. Hippocrates, building on earlier works proposed in the fifth century that the imbalance of bodily fluids caused abnormal behaviors. He then divided these into four fluids or humors. After this he attributed certain characteristics to each humor, thus outlining behavior by the abundance or lack of different humors. Though today we may scoff at this simplistic approach, it is interest to note that these ideas held away and were not challenged until 3100 years after his death. This, until the scientific thinkers of the Renaissance emerged and brought an end to the dark ages, Hippocrates ideas prevailed. During the twelfth century a whole science and field of study for physicians was the understanding of humors and the measurement of them by taking pulses (Schneck, 1960).

After this method passed on an even more interesting biological approach was developed. This was phrenology, the study of the shape of human heads. The phrenologist predicted individuals’ behavior by the shape of their head. Though it has not basis scientifically, it was extremely popular, much like modern day astronomy. This concept was enlarged upon to include the whole body and was called sarcognomy. (Alschule, 1965) Though these seem quite childish now, they were the forerunners of modern psychiatry which came into its own in the early nineteenth century. During this period, medicine was conquering many diseases and injuries. Because of this, the world began to look at the medical profession as a cure-all for all problems. Under this impetus, the medical profession began to specialize: one of these new specialized areas was psychiatry. This specialty built itself around the premise that psychological problems are in actuality biological or medical problems. One event in particular added to the thrust of medicine into psychological problems. This discovery that general paresis was not a psychological defect, but rather the result of an advanced case of syphilis, (a bacterial infection (gave credence to the belief that mental problems were medical in nature.

This impetus of the biological or medical approach was further heightened by the refinement and success of shock therapy during the latter half of the nineteenth century. This however does not relate to shock therapy the way we know it today. Early methods of shock therapy included the following: Throwing people into large bathes full of electric eels, spinning them in giant centrifuges, and nearly drowning them in surprise baths. (Altschule, 1965) The greatest bolstering of the biological approach was led by Dorethea Dix who led the way in concern for the humane treatment of insane people. Though she had their best at heart, in the end her simplistic notions added to their pain and suffering. Before her crusade, people who were odd or funny in their behavior were to some extent looked out for and cared for by the local community. Because she convinced people that these people were sick, along with people who were in poor houses, and prisons, there was a 600 percent increase in the number of people in mental asylums. Though it may seem that putting people where they could get help was good; in reality these asylums concentrated almost entirely on custodial care. (Dain, 1964).

Around 1940 the high hopes for biological cures to all mental illness had, to a large extent, fallen by the wayside and the psychological tradition was becoming the dominant force. Though it did not become the dominant point of view until this time, Pythagoras suggested that behavior problems could result from either environmental or biological origins as early as 540 B.C. Based on this thought, Pythagoras set up temples which provided a treatment program of rest, good diet, counseling, and moderation in all things. These thoughts and programs did not survive the overwhelming influence of the supernatural school of thought in ancient Greece. (Schneck, 1960). The first non-environmental proponent of the psychological school of thought was the Roman intellectual Cicero, who placed the cause of psychological problems inside each individual. The methods of dealing with this were diverse and exceedingly colorful. One of these was developed by Anton Mesmer, who wrote his doctoral thesis on his ability to affect a person’s psychology through the use of magnets and a wide variety of other magnetic contraptions. However, some good was accomplished through the rapport he developed with his patients, as well as the mood he put them in during this magnetic séances. Though the psychological school of thought was the last to gain sway, it is now by far the most accepted one. Some theories are scoffed at, such as Freud, but by and large this doctrine for good or evil is accepted by the public (Lahey, 1980).

Meanings of Abnormal

Keeping in mind the historical overview of causes and cures of abnormality, a meaning for the word abnormal can be sought after in a more meaningful fashion. The following are definitions abnormal put forward by various individuals of authority and academic success. Dr. Lahey of the University of Georgia described abnormal to mean “any pattern of thought, feeling, or action that is harmful to the individual or others.” (Lahey, 1980) This definition leaves much to be desired in that it does not describe what is meant by harmful, nor does it address the problem of behavior that is not harmful, but is not considered normal. Another definition based on statistical frequency is the following: Abnormal behavior is that which is statistically infrequent or deviant from the norm. (Hilgard, 1980). Though this definition at first would seem at first to be purely scientific and fair, it is not. Who decides where this arbitrary cut off point for infrequent or abnormal behavior should be drawn has imputed personal cognitive bias into the definition.

More important that is who makes all important decisions as to what infrequent abnormal behavior is good and what abnormal behavior is bad. People with IQs of 160 or more are extremely infrequent and as such would be deemed abnormal, but do they need help? The converse of this situation exist when an individual scores less than 60, yet produces mart masterpieces; abnormal by the laws of statistics, but does he need help? Statistics are fine to take a picture, but in trying to frame a definition of abnormal which fits into reality statistics are of little or no use. Looking for a more workable definition led to the following: abnormal is what the society in which one lives classifies it to be according to that society’s standards. This definition may suffice in a totally homogenous society, but in a heterogeneous society such as exists in the United States, it becomes hopelessly bogged down by every society within society having conflicting ideas as to just what abnormal means. Thus, this creates conflict which in turn leads to each group trying to label the other as abnormal. (Coleman, 1976) Furthermore, it is believed by some that for something to be considered abnormal it should be felt to be abnormal by the person doing it. This concept does not rend itself very useful to professionals trying to deal with abnormal people. The following detailed examination of the word abnormal is put forward in the encyclopedia of psychology.

“The word abnormal is used in several different senses and also in various combinations. The major dimensions of differentiation are: (a) whether it is defined as deviation from the ideal normal or as the statistical unusuality (b) whether the definition of abnormality is to be universal or to differ according to the culture; and (c) whether it is based on objective characteristic of behavior, or on the fact that a person is objectionable to himself or others. Satisfactory definition also depends on and is made problematic by studies of the development and health of personality of cultural norms, of the reaction of individuals and society to deviant behavior and so on.” (Coming, 1972) At first glance one would surmise that this passage contains a complex and complete definition of abnormality, however, closer scrutiny reveals it consists of nothing more than a haphazard collection of the simpler definitions listed previously. After reviewing these and many other definitions it has become apparent that each scholar or professional has a preferential definition with all their personal, cultural, and other biases included in it. Thus, it becomes quite apparent that the definition of abnormal is highly ambiguous and because of its tremendous social impact on an individual can be used as a two-edged sword, capable of either helping or destroying individuals by its implications.

Discussion of the Harmful Effects of the Use of Ambiguous

Abnormal Definition

“Later, as Jesus and His disciples were eating dinner, there were many notorious swindlers there as guests! The Pharisees were indignant. ‘Why does your teacher associate with men like that?’ ‘Because people who are well don’t need a doctor!’ It’s the sick people who do!’ was Jesus’ reply.” (Christ) Over two thousand years ago, Jesus painted a vivid picture of what would be a major problem in the ambiguity of the definition of abnormal: that is the treating of the people who are not sick, while those who are truly suffering go wanting. Several theories giving credence to the disastrous effects of incorrectly categorizing an individual by the use of a bogus or ambiguous use of the definition have come to existence. Labeling, social identity, and biased testing are the three major theories or ideas which point to the ill effects of this poor use of the word abnormal.

Labeling theory supports the contention that you are or become what you are labeled to be. Therefore, if an individual is labeled abnormal, even if an abnormal condition does not exist, he may eventually become abnormal due to the effects of the labeling process. Clearly then, the importance of a correct understanding of the meaning of the word abnormal is vital in the correct treatment of the individuals. Of added significance labeling theory as related to the word abnormal, is a complete comprehensive understanding of the word abnormal. Accepting the labeling theory as credible leads to the conclusion that when the mere use of a label may determine the fate of an individual in society, it becomes vitally important to understand the word or words such as abnormal, which form the label. (Harris, 1982, Resenhan, 1973)

Another theory which is strongly affected by the meaning of the word abnormal is social identity, or in a broader sense, social learning. Many critics of the American Criminal Justice System and Psychological community contend that too many decisions are based on a persons' social identity, rather than reality. The identity of the individual largely shaped by what is considered abnormal plays a tremendous role in the way he will be treated. (Hill, 1982) Further proof of social identity and the relationship of how the meaning of the word abnormal comes to be applied can be found in studies showing people of different socio-economic classes construed as abnormal in different fashions. (Holingshed and Redlich, 1958) Illustrating, once again, the clear and critical impact of the use of the word abnormal can have is the finding that the socio-economic class of a person can also be tremendously affected by whether they are classified as abnormal or not. This can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy of some economic classes having more of one type of abnormal behavior than others solely on the basis of the definition of the word. (Robins 66, Turner, 68) Once again, clearly the use of abnormal in any way other than a clear-cut and correct manner cannot be considered less than very ill-advised and at the most criminal and inhuman.

The strongest and most straight-forward attack on the ambiguous use of the term abnormal comes from research on biased testing. No test can be totally biased-free even with a clear-cut understanding of the terminology. When this compound with the use of ambiguous terminology such as abnormal, the test results can become nothing more than a sham. As long as the person who designs, administers, and interprets test operates within the gray line of undefined abnormality, the personal definition he uses for the world will have more effect and repercussions than the test scores themselves. At this point in time it would appear that due to the lack of clarity as to what means what as far as test results go, and then the opaqueness of what something is determined to be, tests are, to say the least, inadequate to deal with categorizing human beings. (Wallach, 1969, Bartol, 1983)

Unclarity in Evaluation Reports

Throughout society the evaluation of individuals by superiors or professionals dealing with individuals is becoming more common. Along with this, evaluations are having more critical importance in shaping peoples' lives. Job, health, social status, and general life happiness can all be adversely affected by personal evaluations which are detrimental in nature.

To show the critical importance of the clearly defined use of the word abnormal, the following evaluation report will be extremely useful. The report will not be presented in its entirety as only a small portion is required.

In the first sentence of the second paragraph of the instructions for the evaluation the following passage is inscribed, "Indicate your opinions about the patient." Having previously discussed the critical importance of evaluations on peoples' lives this passage contains nothing more than a tragic absurdity rather than a clear-cut instruction.

Further, relating back to the need for a clear definition of abnormal, one sees that if evaluations are already subjected to biased opinions how much more inadequate those opinions are when they are all based on different conceptions of the meaning of the word abnormal. Delving deeper into the evaluation, the results of these opinions begin to become apparent. The first question on page 20 of the evaluation form reads, "The patient is well developed." The evaluation has used the word well to describe the condition of the individual. When one thinks of well, the vision of a normal or good-looking individual comes to mind; however, in the very next passage, the evaluator concludes that the individual is undernourished. How someone who is undernourished can appear well is explained by the ambiguity involved in the definition of abnormal. Furthermore, the classification of normally or abnormally nourished rest on an individual's definition of the word abnormal.

Two different conceptions of abnormal by an individual can thus explain the discrepancy of how a well-developed man can be malnourished. Later on in the evaluation, the patients' attire and grooming are listed as bizarre. Procedurally, this is quite unfortunate because a person's style of attire can only be described as abnormal in a very ambiguous nature because it in itself is an ambiguity. These subtle plays on words and semantics may seem unimportant, as they would be in political rhetoric, but in this case they are dealing with the most sacred thing in the world, a person's mind and freedom.

Conclusions

Abnormal is just a word, but is so deadly. The supernatural school of thought has never entirely left the minds of the public. Perpetuation of this idea has led the public to look upon things deemed abnormal as evil in nature. (Bozzuto, 1975) This however does not constitute the cause of the pain inflicted by the misuse of the word abnormal, but rather is the end result of its misuse. Abnormal itself is not evil, but rather the meanings society's institutions place upon it is. The major cause of the tragic results of the use of the word abnormal certainly does not rest with individuals. But rather from the systems and organizations which use the word. (Bakan, 1982, Chorover, 1973)

As the public became more aware of the plight of people wrongly labeled abnormal through mass media presentations such as the movie, "One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest," people doing the classifying and their definitions of abnormal came under much closer scrutiny. However, it seems as if since this had occurred, professionals who use this term are hiding behind an ever mounting wall of technical terminology and gobblety-gook. Using semantics they are attempting to hide the work from the laymen who in fact are most likely to be affected by it. (Chorover, 1973)

To tell a parent they have a weird, bloodthirsty, stupid son is one thing, but to change the terminology used in words such as abnormal, aggressive or low IQ, is quite another. A mother may question a psychologist calling her son weird or even abnormal, but if told her son is a deviant she may not question quite as hard. In other words, when all else fails, hide behind some big meaningless words.

Abnormal and the definition of it cannot be considered in an ecological void as it is today. The environment has such a great deal with peoples' conception of the meaning of the word abnormal; they cannot be viewed separately. A person transported from a mountain top cabin where he has lived for several years to a large metropolitan mental clinic may be considered totally abnormal by professional, where as if that same professional had been helped by the mountain man when he became lost on a weekend camping trip, he may define him not just normal, but even heroic. Only by understanding someone's ecological environment can one hope to develop a meaningful definition of the word abnormal as applied to that person. (Cuttings, 1982)

The imperfection of man is apparent, though his ability to perfectly define individuals into normal/abnormal categories routinely goes without question. This fact manifests itself in the horror stories coming out of American mental institutions. I believe this represents an abnormal society which poses the question, 'Isn't an abnormal society defining an individual as abnormal equivalent to the pot calling the kettle black?' Before this society can ever hope to define abnormal, it must understand normality and come to practice it.

A society that spends billions on pets, while humans starve does not have any right to define people abnormal. A society that goes to movies while thousands of people are killed by Russian gas attacks cannot pass abnormal judgment on others. A society which builds nuclear bombs as fast as it builds complex machines to save lives must not be given the right to declare individuals abnormal or should we be honest and say...crazy. God mad man, who are we to judge the work of something we cannot even prove exists. Though there may be passion in these words, it is my firm belief it will take more than logic and science to adequately define abnormal, but rather only through the word and use of compassion can we define abnormal in a suitable fashion.

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