Outline and Evaluate definitions of Abnormality

Deviation from social norms is one of the three definitions for abnormality. This term suggests abnormal behaviour is a deviation from explicit (written) and implicit (unwritten) rules of society’s idea of acceptable behaviour. People who violate social norms are often seen as deviant or abnormal. For example, someone who stands too close to someone during a conversation or someone who does not dress according to a particular code would be deviating for societal implicit rules. Showing inappropriate emotion, e.g laughing when hearing about death may be seen as a symptom of schizophrenia. However, there are several limitations with this definition of abnormality.

One limitation is that deviation from social norms do not always indicate a psychological abnormality. Some behaviours are eccentric rather than abnormal. For example, streaking across a football pitch may be seen as strange but we would not regard that person as mentally disturbed. However, someone who shouts at an imaginary person in public would be more likely to have a mental disorder. Therefore not all ‘abnormal’ behaviour can be regarded as pathological.

Szasz 1974 suggested when the majority of society forms ideas of social norms we end up labelling people as abnormal who are only non-conformists. Leading to people being susceptible to abuse and stigma for being abnormal when they are only eccentric or refuse to conform. Szasz also argued abnormality does not exist but it is only a way of control from government. Therefore questioning whether what society believes is abnormal really is abnormal and not just an idea society has been lead to believe.

A limitation for the idea of deviation from explicit rules being abnormal was sown by Milgram and Zimbardo’s research. They demonstrated ordinary decent people placed in positions of power may commit evil, antisocial acts. Therefore showing a deviation from explicit rules in a criminal sense does not always mean a psychological abnormality.

Cultural relativism means we cannot define one’s behaviour as abnormal without taking culture into account. What is abnormal in one culture may be seen as acceptable in another. For example, talking to an invisible person after bereavement is considered normal in African cultures yet not in others. Therefore, we cannot label one behaviour as determining an abnormality as it may be acceptable in that certain culture.

‘Failure to function adequately’ this definition explains abnormalities and people with psychological disorders as having a general inability to cope with everyday tasks, such as working or social activities. Rosenham and Seligman 1989 identified 7 characteristics of symptoms of abnormalities. Three of these characteristics are suffering, maladaptive behaviour and observer discomfort. Suffering implies the person is upset/depressed. Maladaptive behaviour is the behaviour in which disrupts daily functioning or healthy relationships. If an individual shows a series of these characteristics it is likely that person may be abnormal.

However, there are limitations of this definition. As pointed out by Comer 2005, dysfunction alone does not indicate psychological abnormalities. An abnormality does not necessarily