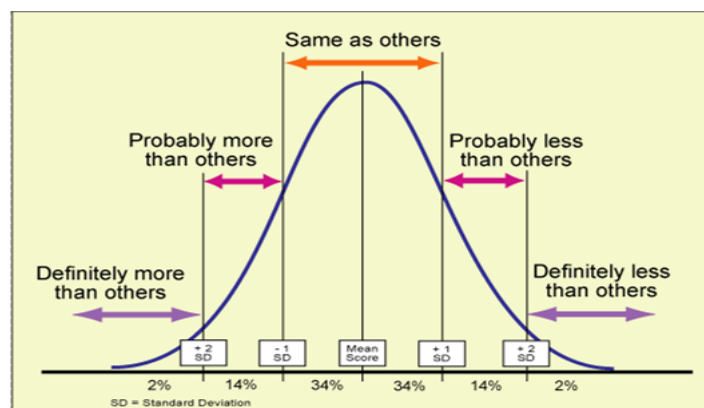




Second, there are some behaviours which are statistically frequent, but are either socially undesirable and/or actually classified as mental disorders. For example, statistically, *child abuse* is actually very common, and therefore something the majority do. By this definition of abnormality, because the majority abuse children it is defined as a 'normal' behaviour. However, anyone who doesn't abuse children is in the minority and therefore is defined as 'abnormal'. Again, this just doesn't fit with what common sense tells us.

Third, the cut-off point for deciding when a behaviour is infrequent enough for us to call it 'abnormal' is purely arbitrary. For example, who decides when somebody is 'abnormally tall' or 'abnormally short'? Of course, there is no *objective* answer to this question. Even our definitions of when a person is 'subnormal' (a pretty important definition to have) are based on judgements that are not objective.



Average IQ is 100. Some people score more than this, and some less. But when is an IQ score abnormally low (or high)?

Fourth, the statistical frequency of a behaviour can differ *between cultures*, so this definition is *bound by culture*. It is possible to think of behaviours that are statistically infrequent in one culture, but statistically frequent in another. A (surprising) example would be *homosexuality*. As noted previously, in our culture heterosexuality is the majority behaviour and is therefore 'normal'. But what if homosexuality was the majority behaviour in another culture? Homosexuality would therefore be 'normal'. But which behaviour would truly be 'normal', heterosexuality or homosexuality?

As you've guessed, there isn't an answer to this, and so defining abnormality in terms of statistical infrequency is limited to the particular culture a behaviour occurs in. We can say that this definition is '*bound by*

*culture*'. Moreover, just because a behaviour is common in our culture, but uncommon in another, doesn't give us the right to tell other people they are 'abnormal'. This is called '*cultural relativism*': **behaviour cannot be judged properly unless it is viewed in the context in which it originates.**



No one culture has the 'right' to dictate to any other culture

As well as behaviours differing *between* cultures in terms of their statistical frequency, they can also differ *within* a single culture. For example, eating jellied eels is a statistically frequent behaviour in some parts of our culture, but is statistically infrequent in other parts. So is it 'normal' to eat jellied eels or not? Again, we just can't say. So, whilst defining abnormality in terms of statistical infrequency *looks* like a good definition, there are too many problems associated with it for it to be acceptable.

### Defining abnormality as a deviation from ideal mental health

This definition views people as being normal or abnormal according to whether or not they possess certain *psychological characteristics*. This gives us the following definition: **Abnormality is possessing characteristics the mentally healthy person should not possess, or not possessing characteristics the mentally healthy person should possess.**

What kinds of things do you think constitute 'ideal mental health'? An eminent psychologist called **Marie Jahoda** wrote a book in 1958 called '*Current Concepts of Positive Mental Health*'. She identified a number of characteristics which she thought were indicative of 'ideal mental health' in our culture. They include the following:

- Being able to make your own choices/decisions
- Being able to resist stress
- Being able to perceive reality accurately
- Being able to self-actualise
- Being able to adapt to the environment

Unfortunately, as with the previous definition, there are many limitations to this way of defining abnormality. At least 6 can be identified:

First, ***most*** people do not satisfy all, many, or any of the ideals.

Therefore, *most* people would be defined as abnormal. But if *most* people are abnormal, then doesn't this mean that being abnormal is normal if we define abnormality in terms of statistical infrequency?

Second, **claims about ideal mental health are *value judgements***. Whilst Jahoda might be described as an 'eminent psychologist', we don't have to accept her ideals if we don't want to. Notice that this problem usually does not occur when it comes to judgements about *physical health*.

Third, **different cultures have different ideals, so the definition is *bound by culture***. Certainly, some ideals *are* shared by members of different cultures, but not all ideals are. For example, what is considered to be healthy in one culture is not necessarily considered to be healthy in another. Again, this is not usually an issue with respect to *physical health*.



Is hearing voices in your head 'healthy' or 'unhealthy'?

Fourth, **even within a culture, 'healthiness' is determined by the *context* in which a behaviour occurs**. For example, taking your clothes off in order to get into the bath is a healthy thing to do. However, taking your clothes off to go shopping in Sainsbury's isn't (unless it is a branch at a nudist colony - the *context* in which the behaviour occurs determines its healthiness).

Fifth, the definition is *era-dependent*. Visual and auditory hallucinations were taken to be a sign of healthy religious fervour in thirteenth century Europe, but in Europe in the twenty-first century they might lead to a diagnosis of schizophrenia.

Sixth, and finally, the definition depends on a person's *stage of development*. Whilst we are generally accepting of 'temper tantrums' in two-year-olds, we are less accepting when they occur in twenty-two-year-olds.



A 'healthy' temper tantrum



An 'unhealthy' temper tantrum

These six limitations indicate that whilst viewing abnormality in terms of deviating from ideal mental health might look like it's useful, there are too many problems with this definition for it to be acceptable.

### Defining abnormality as a deviation from social norms

All societies have *norms*, or ways of behaving that are acceptable or unacceptable. Some of these norms are *explicit*, whilst others are

*implicit*. Either way, deviating from these norms is likely to result in some form of sanction being imposed by a society's members. This gives us the following definition of abnormality: **Doing things that society says should not be done, or not doing things that society says should be done (i.e. violating a society's implicit or explicit social norms).**

By this definition, dropping litter would be an abnormal behaviour in our culture, because we have an explicit social norm (i.e. a law) about littering. Not queuing when waiting for a bus would also be considered abnormal in our culture, because although there is no law that says we have to queue when waiting for a bus, there is an implicit social norm about queuing at bus stops.



Queuing. A British way of life...

As with the previous definitions, this way of defining abnormality initially appears to be helpful. However, as with the previous definitions there are problems with it. Here are 3 major limitations:

First, **some behaviours which deviate from social norms are actually statistically frequent**. A good example here would be *dropping litter*. Statistically, it is a very common behaviour. However, it is also against the law (it is an *explicit norm* to not drop litter). Therefore, dropping litter is judged to be an abnormal behaviour even though it is statistically common. What this means is that most people are abnormal by this definition. And if most people are abnormal, then by the statistical infrequency definition, it is normal to be abnormal. Do you see how silly things can get?

Second, **different cultures have different social norms, so what is 'normal' in one culture may be 'abnormal' in another**. Once again, we

have a definition which is *bound by culture*. The way in which the British behave at traffic lights is incomprehensible to Italian drivers - they think we are 'mad'. Equally, the behaviour of the relatives of a deceased Trobriand island husband is 'weird' as far as the British are concerned. But whose behaviour is right, and whose is wrong? It is the issue of *cultural relativism* again - no one culture has the 'right' to tell another culture what is normal or abnormal.

Third, **the definition is era-dependent**. As with other definitions, social norms can also change *within* a culture over time. Examples of social norms that have changed include unmarried women being interned in mental institutions (up to the beginning of the twentieth century), men wearing earrings, and homosexuality (classified as a mental disorder until 1973). Once again, we have a definition of abnormality which looks like it might be useful, but actually has many limitations.

### Defining abnormality as a failure to function adequately

There is some overlap between this and the deviation from ideal mental health definition: **Abnormality is defined as failing to achieve some sense of personal well-being and failing to make some contribution to a larger group**. Note that these are the reasons why people usually come to the attention of clinical psychologists and psychiatrists, and that this definition is probably closest to a 'common sense' definition of abnormality. There are many ways in which people can be considered to be failing to function adequately. These are just four:

(1) Their behaviour causes them **personal distress or discomfort**.

Consider, for example, a person who hears voices in his/her head telling them to do things they don't want to do.

(2) Another way in which a person might not be functioning adequately is if their behaviour causes **other people distress or discomfort (Observer discomfort)**. Consider, for example, a family member who is abusing alcohol or some other substance, which distresses other family members, or a friend who tells us s/he is hearing voices in their head, which causes us to feel distressed about them.

(3) A third way in which a person may not be functioning adequately is if their behaviour is **maladaptive** either to themselves or to society. For example, crossing the road without looking for oncoming cars is a

behaviour which is maladaptive to ourselves, whilst being unable to leave home to go to work is maladaptive to both ourselves and the wider society.

(4) A fourth way in which a person might not be functioning adequately is if their behaviour is **bizarre**. For example, dressing up in clothes of the opposite sex could be considered 'bizarre' behaviour.



Bizarre behaviour?

Even with this way of defining abnormality, however, there are at least five important limitations:

First, **there are some states that cause us personal distress which are actually appropriate responses in certain circumstances**. For example, depression (which is an unpleasant state to experience) is not considered to be abnormal unless it persists beyond what would be accepted as a 'reasonable recovery time'.

Second, **some behaviours that are classified as mental disorders do not cause personal distress**. A good example here would be *anti-social personality disorder (psychopathy)*, which is characterised by the inability to experience guilt over one's wrongdoings.

Third, **it is impossible to measure 'personal distress' in an objective way**. When someone tells us they are feeling distressed, we have no way of knowing exactly how distressed they are. They might, for example, tell us that they are feeling extremely distressed, but we wouldn't be able to measure exactly how much distress they were experiencing.

Fourth, whether a behaviour is an example of failing to function adequately depends on the **context** in which that behaviour occurs. As



Houston et al (1991) have noted: '*Behaviours such as dressing up in the clothing of the opposite sex is not inherently abnormal. Depending on its context, such behaviour may be entertaining and profitable for those performing it.*'

Fifth, a behaviour which might be considered a failure to function adequately in one culture might be viewed as functioning adequately in another culture. For example, in our culture the game of dominoes is a very quiet affair, typically enjoyed by elderly men in a quiet corner of a pub. However, in West Indian culture, the game is raucous and noisy and played in a way which, to people in our culture, would be considered 'bizarre'. Once again, cultural relativism means that we have to be careful before we apply the label 'bizarre' to other peoples' behaviour.



In our culture, dominoes is a quiet game. In other cultures, it isn't.

### So how do we define abnormality?

All of the definitions we have looked at have their strengths and limitations. All of them are useful, but none is complete, and there is no general agreement about which is 'best'. Most people involved in this area take a '**multiple perspectives**' approach, that is, they evaluate a behaviour using each of the definitions before reaching a decision about whether it is 'abnormal' or not.