

Normality Does Not Equal Mental Health

The Need to Look Elsewhere for Standards of Good Psychological Health

PRAEGER PUBLISHERS, 2011
ISBN: 978-0-313-39931-2

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Synopsis

Contemporary psychiatry and clinical psychology base their conception of mental health on the standard of psychological normality. This supposition has come to be accepted uncritically and without question, and yet it is fundamental to current clinical theory and practice, and forms the core of the psychiatric classification system of the *DSM*, which has become today's diagnostic authority.

And yet there is much evidence that should lead us to question whether psychological normality should serve as a standard for good mental health: There is the experimental evidence of widely replicated experiments such as Milgram's or Zimbardo's, which show that under commonly occurring conditions involving obedience to authority or power over others the greater proportion of psychologically normal people tend to behave cruelly and destructively; and, to be sure, there is the overwhelming testimony of history that attests among psychologically normal people to their capacities for aggression, violence, and a host of other harmful behaviors and attitudes, studied by the author in his book, *The Pathology of Man* (Charles C. Thomas, 2005).

Although the need to question psychological normality as a satisfactory standard of good mental health has been staring us in the face for a long time, no one, clinical professional or scholar, has had the courage or the intellectual willingness to face with unflinching honesty the shortcomings and disappointments of psychological normality and to propose that we should look elsewhere for standards of good psychological health.

Normality Does Not Equal Mental Health is the first book to question the equation of psychological normality and mental health. The author weighs the evidence, and with strict logic, compelling evidence, and careful analysis, challenges the current paradigm of mental health theorists and practitioners. Never has the case against the standard of psychological normality been made with such boldness, multidisciplinary knowledge, solid scholarship, and clarity of language.

The book seeks to show how the presumed standard of normality has come to play a basic role in a surprisingly wide diversity of contexts. The book's broad and well-integrated compass reveals to readers how this unquestioned presumption has come to permeate contemporary consciousness, often in diverse ways that are unrecognized and well-disguised. Individual chapters seek to open new directions for fruitful discussion in psychology, including the following:

On the basis of a carefully argued account that critiques the dominant assumption in current psychiatry and clinical psychology that psychological normality is fundamental to mental health and therefore good, the work proposes a positive and constructive revision in our understanding of mental health and of our conception of mental disorders. The book extends this discussion by enlarging our understanding of the psychology of creativity, often misunderstood as a result of the same bias in favor of psychological normality.

Other chapters show how the unquestioned prejudice in favor of psychological normality has resulted in seldom recognized psychological deficits brought about by a pair of intertwined phenomena: (i) an epidemic of work promoted by the psychology of normality that has led to an incapacitating mental disability of values, resulting in general, society-wide cultural impoverishment, and (ii) the associated decline of a genuinely higher education, which has led to demoralization among university faculty who are profoundly committed to that rapidly vanishing ideal.

These reflections on the widespread, varied, and interlinked consequences of the prevailing prejudice in favor of psychological normality lead to chapters that provide a long avoided and long needed examination of the psychology of peer review and editorial bias, and the first in-depth study of the psychology of mediocrity—both of which, again, involve at their heart the same unexamined allegiance to the standard of psychological normality.

Detail

With an unsentimental eye, the author examines a group of interrelated suppositions central to current psychiatry and clinical psychology. They include

- ✱ the uncritical and unquestioned reliance upon psychological normality as a yardstick in terms of which good mental health is measured;
- ✱ belief in the existence of psychiatry's rapidly inflating universe of "mental disorders," the majority of which the book shows originate in conceptually projective thinking;
- ✱ recourse to a plebiscite of experts who vote new mental disorders into existence;
- ✱ avoidance of serious, objective study of the psychology of peer review and editorial bias, which often serves the social and professional function of suppressing new ideas that threaten the habitual and old.

The author's approach is uncompromisingly honest. He tackles the following neglected subjects and their rarely appreciated interaction with one another:

- ✱ the underlying psychology of psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, and social workers who are responsible for elevating normality to serve as a measure of good mental health;
- ✱ the psychology of the professional process used by psychiatry to establish and propound definitions for today's "mental disorders";
- ✱ the psychology of mediocrity, closely related to the psychology of normality, shown by the author

to be an intellectually, emotionally, and behaviorally disabling condition;

✱ *acedia*, a disability unknown to us today, but familiar centuries ago as an impairment in an individual's or a group's capacity to appreciate culture, and today erecting a serious impediment to the future of social development and of higher education;

✱ and, in the context of this critical examination of the equation of psychological normality and mental health, an instructive assessment of the psychology of two groups whose development is handicapped due to a prevailing oppressive environment dominated by psychological normality and the psychology of mediocrity: creative artists and university professors in the liberal arts.

Bartlett is relentless in showing in these varied but deeply interconnected contexts how our reliance upon psychological normality as a standard of good mental health is flawed, and how its continued use impedes individual and group development. To replace it, Bartlett elaborates two constructive and complementary approaches that offer a revisionary and revitalized conception of human psychological problems and of appropriate therapeutic ways to cope with them.

Comparison with existing work

The implicit equation of psychological normality with desirable mental health has never seriously been questioned in existing literature, and therefore never before has been examined in a serious, book-length study.

The closest that any psychologist has come to much needed reflection on this central presumption of psychiatry and clinical psychology has been Abraham Maslow, who formulated a paradigm of mental health based on psychological characteristics found in what he termed "self-actualizing individuals." Other authors who have made similar but less detailed proposals include Fromm, who emphasized the "autonomous person"; Rogers, the "fully functioning person"; and Jung, the "individuated person." Maslow's conception of mental health offers a detailed model of positive mental health that deliberately avoids reliance upon a standard of psychological normality. However, to situate the locus of human mental health in what Maslow called "the farther reaches of human nature" is to paint only half of the picture. The other half is to show *why* the prejudice in favor of psychological normality is misplaced and, in fact, erroneous.

None of the above-mentioned authors has gone the full distance, to critique the standard upon which the diagnostic edifice of contemporary psychiatry and clinical psychology is founded: the unquestioned and, as the book shows, the unwarranted belief that psychological normality should be accepted as a gold standard in terms of which we understand good mental health.

Primary audience for the work

Because no previous scholarly study or book for general readers has sought to examine this most basic, central assumption of both psychiatry and the majority of clinical psychology and social work, *Normality Does Not Equal Mental Health* can be expected to have broad appeal, stimulate discussion, and promote healthy controversy among students and professionals in psychiatry, psychology, social work, anthropology, sociology, education, cognitive science, and philosophy of behavioral science, as well as among general readers.

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