English course

<div align="center">But, is it Normal?</div>

She moves so easily. She doesn't need anyone's help. She's so normal, the Multiple Sclerosis patient thought enviously to herself.

"How do you possibly swim laps for hours on end?" a reporter asked the Olympian. "I don't know. It's just normal for me," He responded.

The underprivileged teen sat nervously on the chair of the Oprah show. "Do you feel that you are at a disadvantage because of your background, the sex and drugs in particular?" the famous host asked him expectantly. He shrugged his shoulders and responded, "Not really, all of that is just normal, day-to-day stuff."

All three of these people have different ideas of what the word "normal" means. Are any of them incorrect? Can anyone consider themselves to be completely normal or abnormal? Although the word "normal" is used fairly frequently in today's society, it is nearly impossible to tag it with one single, concise definition. This is because "normal" is subjective in reference to dictionary definition, geography, and culture; and can fluctuate from person to person.

The Oxford English Dictionary has many different definitions for the word normal, ranging from right-angled and perpendicular to a type of school for teachers in the 1800s[1]. Most people would agree that formulating one exact definition of normal is extremely difficult because everyone seems to have an internal definition that is slightly different from others. Definitions of many words, not just normal, all seem to change with the times but normal's evolution seems to be extraordinary. This is because there

are so many different connotations that it has and depending on the time that the word was used, many different meanings.

One of the most common and widely accepted definitions of "normal" is the fact that it fits in with social and societal standards of the time. It is something that is regular, typical, expected. In mathematics, a "normal curve" is one that is symmetrical and even, with a single peak[2]. Normal is average, mediocre, and can be seen in both a good and a bad light. People who consider themselves to be abnormal, look at other people and envy their "normalness." But normal can also be considered mundane and lacking originality. In our society, individuality and conformity are both reinforced in opposite ways. Though many people state that they want to be an individual and different, many people strive with all of their being to be considered normal, to fit in with the crowd. Being normal is basically a nicer way of wording the fact that most people enjoy conforming to a group.

However, what is considered to be normal behavior in the United States may be very different from other places around the globe. Take the Eunuchs of India for example.   Boys and men in this culture have their testes and penis removed and this process is considered to be highly normal; if someone refuses to have this done, it is forcibly done to them[3].   In the United States, this practice would seem extremely abnormal , horrific, and cruel.   This shows the wide range of activities that are considered to be normal in different cultures. Because of this difference, it does not give the word "normal" any concrete ground for a definition. The meaning of the word changes depending on where the word is spoken.

The situation that the word "normal" is used in plays an important role to understanding its definition. Even in the same culture, normality is a topic that is up for debate. The website, isitnormal.com devotes itself to helping decipher if certain behaviors are considered normal by other people. The subtitle of the website states, "Are you normal? Curious how others might perceive your situation? Submit your story today and find out what others think…" Anyone is welcome to writing a story or behavior that they possess and after they hit post, it becomes open for public scrutiny. Hundreds of people throw in their two cents and tell the poster whether or not they consider their behavior to be normal.

From observing the site, it seems as if the majority of people view the concept of normality as if it were on a spectrum. It is impossible to be completely normal or completely abnormal. Even someone who had never been exposed to true civilization must show some signs of normality. They would be able to walk or make sounds with their mouth, something that our society considers to be normal. So instead of extremes, the spectrum allows for comparison on the website (and in the world in general). It allows people to say, "Well, I am more normal than that guy; at least I'm not him." In a way society feels pity for people who do not conform to social norms. But how does one decide where they land on the spectrum? According to this website, there is some sort of normality-meter that people can use in order to judge others. But since this meter is never spoken about, each person creates their own, internal judge of normality. This creates differences between every person. "Normal" cannot be pinned with one definition and therefore some behaviors have discrepancies about whether they are normal or not, even within the same culture.

To make things more complicated within a culture, the DSM-V psychology manual that is coming out in 2011will put more constraints on what is considered normal behavior.[4] This is the guidebook that will basically tell all things about psychology, the study of the human mind and mental processes. The goal of this newly revised book is to determine the pathological; what is abnormal? Though this could be a good thing in the field of psychology, deciding who in the world needs to seek therapeutic/medical treatment, it can also feel constricting and smothering. Feeling the requirement of having to appear normal can be an act of control. If someone was screaming obscenities and destroying property in the middle of a school (acting completely against social norms), the principal or someone of authority would immediately put a stop to it. By maintaining normality in society, order is also sustained.   With the same idea, no one would want "crazy" people walking around on the streets and that is why the psychologists decide what is normal brain activity and normal behavior. They decide who should receive medication, who should be locked in a psychiatric hospital, and also who is doing just fine and is acting "normally."

The magazine Psychology Today recently released an article talking about this very subject and questioning the DSM-IV-TR's credibility. The author of the article, Peter Kramer, believes that the more conforming a person is, the more "normal" they seem to be considered. He says, "To constrain normality is to induce conformity. To expand diagnosis is to induce anxiety. Is anyone really well?"[4] This is an extremely good point. The lines of normality continuously get blurrier and blurrier and the people who are considered normal now fall into a small group with very specific criteria. Knowing this, is being normal even a good thing?

Though spoken so commonly, the uses of "normal" vary in terms of the time, the culture that it is being said in, and even the specific context within the same culture. If the people of the 2010's "modern" society are not able to come up with a definition (the extremely vague, general one in the Oxford English Dictionary simply does not count), then what gives them the right to use the word at all? Obviously a better, more carefully chosen word would benefit the speaker and help them to describe someone or something better and more precisely. The word "normal" doesn't paint a picture of anything in the reader's mind. Because it is basically devoid of meaning, "normal" could be clipped out of our language to help keep our modern society up to date and moving forward.

References:

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