Beyond the Label

How culture and history shape judgments about mental health

P.6.2 "Explain how both cultural and historical influences have affected the definition of maladaptive behavior, including the harmful effects of diagnostic labeling and the social stigmas attached to them."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline two ways culture or history can change what people call maladaptive behavior. Circle one harmful effect of a diagnostic label, then number the evidence you marked 1, 2, and 3.

Who Decides What Is a Disorder?

(1) At a community clinic, a counselor hears that a grieving person sometimes hears a late grandmother's voice. In one community, relatives may understand this as part of mourning or a spiritual experience. In another, people may see the same report as a warning sign of illness. Neither reaction alone settles whether the experience is maladaptive. A careful assessment asks whether the person is distressed, whether daily life is disrupted, and what the experience means in that person's culture. Culture shapes what others notice and judge, but it should not replace attention to the individual's needs.

(2) History shows that definitions can reflect power as well as evidence. In 1851, a physician in the United States invented the term "drapetomania" to describe enslaved people who tried to escape. Escape was a rational response to enslavement, not an illness. The false label served a racist system by treating resistance as a problem inside the person rather than confronting the injustice. A different shift came in 1973, when the American Psychiatric Association voted to remove homosexuality as a diagnosis from its manual. Activism and changing scientific and social views challenged the earlier classification, which had wrongly treated a sexual orientation as a disorder.

(3) Labels can also shape what happens after an assessment. An accurate diagnosis may help someone get treatment or school support, but a label applied without good evidence can follow a person through records and relationships. A classmate might hear that a student has a mental health diagnosis and assume the student is dangerous, even though a diagnosis does not establish that. This is stigma: a negative judgment attached to a trait or label. Fear of such judgment may keep people from seeking help. Understanding cultural context and the history of past errors can help people question unfair labels without dismissing real distress.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How might two communities interpret the grieving person's experience differently, and why is neither interpretation enough to decide whether it is maladaptive?

2. How did the term "drapetomania" reflect the power of enslavers rather than evidence of an illness?

3. What changed in 1973, and how does that change show that definitions of disorders can be influenced by history?

4. How could stigma affect a student after a classmate learns of the student's diagnosis?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Imagine a student who rarely makes eye contact in class and is quickly called "disordered." Write four sentences explaining a possible cultural influence, one lesson from historical changes in diagnoses, one harmful effect of the label, and a fair way to decide whether support is needed.

Beyond the Label

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline two ways culture or history can change what people call maladaptive behavior. Circle one harmful effect of a diagnostic label, then number the evidence you marked 1, 2, and 3. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How might two communities interpret the grieving person's experience differently, and why is neither interpretation enough to decide whether it is maladaptive?	**One community may understand it as part of mourning or a spiritual experience, while another may see a warning sign of illness. An assessment must also consider distress, disruption to daily life, and cultural meaning.**
2	How did the term "drapetomania" reflect the power of enslavers rather than evidence of an illness?	**It falsely treated a rational attempt to escape enslavement as an illness, shifting attention away from the injustice of slavery.**
3	What changed in 1973, and how does that change show that definitions of disorders can be influenced by history?	**The American Psychiatric Association voted to remove homosexuality as a diagnosis. Activism and changing scientific and social views challenged its earlier classification.**
4	How could stigma affect a student after a classmate learns of the student's diagnosis?	**The classmate might wrongly assume the student is dangerous. Fear of such judgments could keep the student or others from seeking help.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

In some cultures, avoiding eye contact with an adult can show respect, so this behavior needs context. Past diagnoses have sometimes treated differences or resistance as illness, which warns us not to label the student too quickly. The label could lead classmates to avoid the student. A counselor should listen to the student and consider distress and daily functioning before deciding whether support is needed.

Accept other culturally grounded explanations of eye contact and other accurate historical lessons from the passage. Responses should not treat eye contact alone as evidence of a disorder.