

Lesson 1.

THE NATURE and SCOPE OF PSYCHOLOGY

LESSON AIM

Define psychology and explain basic theoretic approaches

Despite their interest in the subject, students of psychology often find it difficult to answer this basic question in a clear, concise and specific manner.

Some might say that psychology is a study of "human behaviour"; some might say it is a study of the "mind or brain"; others might say that it is a study of personality and what motivates people to do what they do. All are partly correct, but each of these answers is focused on only some aspect of psychology.

It is now generally agreed that psychology is a **science**.

Definition

Science – Objective study.

Psychologists study

Definition

Behaviour – The observable actions of a person/animal.

***Behaviour**

Behaviour includes being kind, angry, breathing, walking, aggressive, getting old, becoming a grandparent and so on.

***Experience** – If we study behaviour, we need to understand what the experience of that behaviour is like for the individual. I.e. If we study someone being angry, we need to know what that feels like for the person.

***Human and animal behaviour** – often psychologists can not perform experiments on humans for ethical reasons and may use animals to try to gain understanding of human behaviour. For example, by trying to teach monkeys to talk, researchers have gained insight into how humans may develop their language skills.

As psychology is a science, - it is vital that it can be studied scientifically and objectively. We can study, experiment with and objectively talk about manifest behaviour. However, the *experience* of that behaviour is a subjective experience, where we rely on the individual to *tell us* how it feels.

Definition

Subjective – Usually used to refer to something existing inside oneself and not capable of being experienced by others.

This contrasts with **Objective** – dealing with facts in a way that is unaffected by feelings or opinions.

Positivism - A philosophical doctrine that scientific knowledge is limited to observed fact and experience.

Manifest – Expressed or observable.

Therefore, a generally accepted definition of psychology is "the study of human behaviour. Behaviour can provide us with valuable windows into a person's emotional and cognitive states, and if we can understand the psychological influences on behaviour, we can try to better understand a person's inner experience.

BUT IT'S ALL COMMON SENSE ISN'T IT?

Many people argue that psychology is just common sense. Many people will say things like someone behaves like this because of that – we are all “armchair psychologists”. But how do we *know* that what we are saying is correct? This is the starting point that psychologists use when studying human behaviour. A good example is the murder of Kitty Genovese. She was stabbed to death in the middle of a busy residential area of New York. Thirty-eight witnesses saw the attack and none of them did anything to intervene, not even to phone the police. Why? The *common sense* answer might be that they didn't care, that they were callous individuals.

Darley and Latane (1968) carried out research into *why* the witnesses did nothing. They arranged for students to discuss personal problems over an intercom. Only one actual student was involved the others were confederates (ie. working with the researchers, pretending to be students). During the conversations, a confederate would appear to have an epileptic seizure. If the real student thought that five other people were also listening to this person have a seizure, it took them three times as long to react as if they thought there were only two people in the discussion. This suggests that in emergency situations, if we think lots of other people are involved, we may be less likely to do anything – we think someone else will. This is called bystander apathy.

Definition

Bystander Apathy – The tendency of people in social situations not to help strangers in an emergency. The more bystanders there are, the greater the apathy, as responsibility is perceived as not belonging to one individual.

Apathy - Listlessness, passiveness.

So when you consider this, if psychologists had not carried out this research, the overriding view would be that New Yorkers did not care that a woman was being murdered.

DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF HUMAN BEHAVIOUR

There are many different theories and models within psychology which try to explain our behaviour, emotion and thoughts. Each theory contributes something different and increases our understanding.

Therefore, basically psychologists start out with a hypothesis or idea, which they then test. This idea is the basis for empirical research.

Definition

Model - 1) A way of representing patterns of relationships in human behaviour.

Or

2) In social psychology, a person whose behaviour is closely observed.

Theory - A set of assumptions advanced to explain existing phenomena and predict new events.

Paradigm - Representation or model of reality.

Hypothesis – Explanation for observed data that has still to be tested.

Hypothesis testing – Gathering information and testing alternative explanations of certain phenomena.

Empirical – A finding based on experience or observed evidence, the basis for experimental science.

Neurobiological approach

Some psychologists maintain a close link with the discipline of physiology: they perceive the brain and nervous system as the main key to human behaviour, and tend to study the relationship between psychological events (what happens in the mind) and biological events (what happens in the body). Many neurobiologists believe that thought and feelings result from the actions of nerves and the nervous system in the body. For instance, they argue that dreams are the result of activated neurological patterns or random firing of nerve cells.

Behavioural approach

Another fairly conservative approach is that of **behaviourist** psychologists. The founder of this school of thought, J. B. Watson, was the father of the science of psychology (though not of the study of psychology). He argued that if psychology was to be scientific, it must focus exclusively on human behaviour. Watson did not think psychologists should speculate on the unobservable workings of our minds, as they could not be studied scientifically. Watson's approach still has a strong following due to its practical applications, eg. In reducing phobias and so on.

Definition

Stimulus - Sensory input which leads to a response.

Response - The behavioural result of stimulation in the form of movement or glandular secretion.

Much of behavioural research is executed with subjects under experimental conditions, using a stimulus-response approach. The psychologist provides a stimulus for an individual, then observes and studies the individual's response to that stimulus. Behaviourists are sometimes referred to as "black box" theorists because they treat the mind like a clean slate that has attitudes and behavioural patterns inscribed on it due to learning. The behaviourist approach has been used extensively in studying the process of learning.

Cognitive approach

Cognitive comes from the Latin *cognito*, meaning to Apprehend or understand. The cognitive approach developed largely as a reaction to the behavioural approach. Cognitive psychologists argue that individuals do not passively respond to stimuli, but actively process information in their brain *before* responding to the information. They are interested in what happens in the mind between the stimulus and the response. They look at topics such as perception, memory, thought, language and attention. They try to explain behaviour in terms of these mental processes. Cognitive psychology is used in many different ways, such as suggestions on how to improve our memories, improving performance in situations that require concentration, such as air traffic controllers and so on.

Definition

Cognition - A general term including all mental processes by which people become aware of and understand the world.

Perception The process of becoming aware of objects and events by way of sensory organs.

Definition

Performance – Overt (observable) actions or behaviour.

Psychoanalytical approach

One of the most fascinating and influential approaches to human behaviour is **psychoanalysis**, developed by Sigmund Freud. Where the above approaches were formulated on the basis of mainly experimental studies, Freud based his theories upon intensive case studies of a considerable range of patients.

Psychoanalysis focuses on **unconscious** mental activities. According to Freud, much of the individual's observable behaviour is influenced by wishes, desires or fears which the individual has learned to suppress because they are not socially acceptable. As the child develops and learns that some feelings and desires are disapproved of, these wishes, desires and fears are buried deep in the mind, leading to the development of the unconscious. According to Freud, these unconscious impulses still find expression though as dreams, fantasies, slips of the tongue, symptoms of mental illness, as well as in artistic expression, and the individual's psychological history plays an immense role in particular behaviour patterns.

All of the approaches previously discussed adhere firmly to the scientific principles of objectivity -the human individual is perceived as a passive object of analysis rather than an active agent of his/her own destiny. On the one hand, behaviourists claim that human behaviour is largely shaped by environmental stimuli; and on the other hand psychoanalysts claim that behaviour is shaped by unconscious impulses beyond the individual's control.

Phenomenological approach

Because of the demand that psychology be accepted as a scientific discipline, many theorists tended to forget that the subject of their study is the human being, who (unlike the atom or a virus) has self awareness, freedom of choice, a personal value system, and most of all, a desire to be understood, to gain self knowledge, and to grow spiritually. It is these neglected aspects of human behaviour that the phenomenologist chooses to emphasise. For these reasons, phenomenological psychology is often called **humanistic** psychology.

The phenomenological approach rejects the view that the individual is a passive result of uncontrollable forces. The phenomenologist focuses on the individual's **active, subjective experience**, for this approach emphasises the individual's personal interpretation of the world as a cause of behaviour. The individual is regarded as a free agent with the ability to choose his or her own values, actions and goals. Because this approach is so person-centred, it has perhaps received less attention than experimental research, yet it has had a profound influence on methods of therapy and counselling.

Eclectic approach

Although the above approaches have been discussed in isolation, it is important to note that modern psychologists rarely align themselves with one approach exclusively. They are more likely to incorporate aspects of several theories into their approach. This is called the **eclectic approach**.

Other important terms often used in psychology include –

Definitions

Catalyst – A person/thing that causes an important change. A facilitating factor.

Cumulative – Growing in strength, amount or effect by small steps, subject to accumulation.

Facilitate – Make easier.

Modify – Intentionally change something.

Potential – Capacity or Power.

KEY ISSUES IN PSYCHOLOGY

The study of psychology is not by any means a unified study, because there is no agreement on fundamental principles that might explain human behaviour. Therefore, the student will become aware of some conflicting attitudes towards the questions: what influences human behaviour, and how much control does the individual have over their behaviour? These are important questions, and arise frequently in different situations, such as in trying to understand why some people become easily addicted and others don't, or why some abused children will turn into bitter and angry adults, while others don't, or whether some people have a biological predisposition to violence or cruelty, or whether women are naturally maternal or whether maternal behaviour is mostly learned. Some of the key issues behind such questions are discussed below.

Definition Fundamental – Basic and central.

Free will versus determinism

A fundamental issue in psychology is the issue of how much our behaviour can be attributed to choice, and how much to genetic programming. The natural sciences in general are based upon a *deterministic approach* to organic behaviour. This approach implies that behaviour occurs in a regular and orderly manner which is predictable in principle and governed by our genetic makeup and disposition. Because psychology is a relatively young science, it has relied upon imitating the basic principles of other sciences in its approach to human behaviour. Its application of the deterministic approach however, has proved to be most controversial. If people's behaviour is genetically determined, how can they have *free will*? Furthermore, how can they be held responsible for their actions? Most of the approaches discussed above adhere quite firmly to a deterministic approach. However, humanist psychologists argue that people's subjective experience of choice, free will and self-determination cannot be ignored, and is what makes us essentially human.

The question of free will is not just philosophical, for it raises the question of whether a science of human behaviour is really possible. If human behaviour is not governed by constant, predictable and provable factors, can it be effectively studied through experimentation and observation?

Nature-nurture

Within psychology, the nature-nurture debate is ongoing. The debate centres on the issue of whether our psychological attributes are part of our biological/genetic make up, or whether they are formed by a person's interaction with the environment. The two main concepts here are 'biological determination' and 'environmental influence':

- Biological determination is the 'Nature' influence. Psychological attributes such as intelligence, addictiveness and depression may be caused by genetic influences (such as a gene passed on by one parent, or the human genetic makeup) or by biological factors (such as a hormonal imbalance, developmental stages, nervous system damage etc.). **Hereditary** refers to behaviours or characteristics which have been transmitted from parents to offspring. The units of hereditary are **genes**, which determine the course of development in the growing human embryo.

Definition

Gene - A unit composed of DNA forming part of a chromosome, by which inherited characteristics are transmitted from parents to offspring.
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Socialization - The shaping of the individual's behaviour, through training provided by the social environment.
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- Environmental influence is the “Nurture’ influence. Nurture refers to all environmental influences that affect the child’s psychology from its birth, from the way a child is raised (socialized) to the food the child eats. Environmental factors can be very difficult to identify, because in order for them to affect the child’s psychology, they must be registered by the child’s awareness in a way that has an impact. For instance, most infants will grow sickly and apathetic if they are deprived of human touch or affection, yet some will be far less affected, perhaps because they do not register the neglect as strongly, or maybe they have stronger inner resources. In general, however, we can include in environmental influences the behaviour and attitudes of parents, family and peers, the amount and kind of stimulation provided, what a child learns from parents, society, school etc., social and cultural influences, and the surrounding situation, whether it is predictable and safe or dangerous and unpredictable.

Today, most psychologists agree that there is an interaction between nature and nurture. It might be that a child is born, genetically predisposed to be, say, violent, but only with the right environmental triggers (eg. an abusive parent) will that violence occur in the child.

For example, we want to understand why Thomas drinks so much. Is it because he has a biological predisposition or tendency to become addicted to alcohol, or is it because he was influenced by his alcoholic father, whom was frequently drunk during Thomas’s childhood. We cannot simply assume that it is one or the other cause, for it could well be a combination of both. We just cannot know for certain, and if we really want to help Thomas overcome his drinking addiction, we will have to investigate much further to understand what contributes to it, and what factors need to be addressed.

Developmental and Interactive Expressions of Behaviour

Another contentious issue is whether our behaviour is largely a consequence of our past (childhood) experience, or whether it is influenced primarily by our present circumstances. Freud and others of the psychoanalytical school emphasise childhood experiences as critical factors in determining our behaviour. These include influences from the past, such as how we were parented or past psychological traumas. They also include the experiences that a child normally passes through during its development, such as learning that a mother’s absence is not permanent each time she leaves the room, or the hormonal changes experienced by a teenager. All of these are called **developmental** influences on behaviour, and the main question is: What experiences in the person’s past or at the present stage of development are causing this behaviour?

Other theorists emphasise the influence of a person’s current experience on their behaviour. These theorists focus on **interactive** explanations of behaviour which consider present trends in the individual’s life, present fears and goals, present environmental conditions, and current relationships. The person finds ways to respond to his or her environment, and the behaviour is a strategy adopted to help the person cope. The main question here is: What strategies are working for this person and which need to be changed?

Both developmental and interactive explanations of behaviour are valid and necessary. Depending upon the individual’s predicament, one approach may be more appropriate than another. For example, if we are counselling a newly divorced woman, we may explain her behaviour in terms of present influences such as social isolation and a blow to her self esteem. On the other hand, imagine if a friend suffers from a nervous breakdown "out of the blue", so to speak. During the last five years that we have known her, her life has been running smoothly, without apparent crises or significant change. It may be appropriate then to investigate her past history, to determine any causes of anxiety or tension. Both situations can lend themselves to either kind of explanation, so again, the psychologist cannot just assume, but must investigate further.

Psychoanalysis favours developmental explanations because of its emphasis on childhood history. Behaviourism favours developmental explanations because of its emphasis on past learning experiences. On the other hand, cognitive and phenomenological psychologists favour interactive explanations, because their theories focus on the individual's present perception and interpretation of events. Clearly, we might often need to look for explanations in the past or biology *and* in the person's current responses to the existing situation, for the past and the present are inextricably connected. Often our present interpretations of recent experiences are closely related to past experiences.

Example: Compliance

Compliance is a behaviour that can usually be explained interactively, though some of the underlying reasons that a person complies in certain situations might be developmental. Compliance includes the following behaviours:

- agreeing with others because you have been persuaded or decided it's the most productive path
- pretending to agree
- going along with others' ideas or actions
- giving in or surrendering
- obeying
- conforming to others' expectations or values.

Some reasons for compliance are:

- fear, threat or danger
- respect for, or acceptance of authority or expertise
- to gain something (a job, a date, recognition, approval, a reward)
- to avoid losing something (love, approval, friends, acceptance, a promotion)
- out of apathy (not caring either way, not thinking that your choices matter, feeling helpless to change things, being depressed)
- out of laziness (avoiding responsibility, not bothering to make decisions, not bothering to learn the facts..)
- for health reasons (too ill to think about it, drained, not having the energy to resist)]
- out of doubt, confusion or ignorance (just don't know if our alternative is better, don't trust our own judgement, thinking maybe they know better or more than we do).

In each of these situations, it is possible that the person's behaviour is influenced by past experiences, the person's current stage of development, or the person's perceptions of and responses to the current circumstances. For instance, I might comply in order to please others because I value my relationship with them (interactive explanation), yet my belief that I must please others in order to maintain relationships might stem from childhood experiences in which my parents only showed affection and approval when I complied with them, and withdrew affection when I did not.

Applying psychology – Questionnaires, Interviews and Surveys

Psychological research and therapies are often concerned with finding out how people think and feel about certain issues or matters, and why. The only way researchers can investigate attitudes, thoughts, feelings, values and expectations is to ask people. One method of gathering this information is through surveys, interviews and questionnaires.

Questionnaires come in two main forms –

*Face to face (interviews)

*Written answers (questionnaire surveys)

Coolican (1994) categorised six main types of interviews

***Non-Directive Interviews** These are the least structured. The person interviewed (the interviewee) is free to discuss almost anything they want. The interviewer's role is to guide the discussion and encourage the interviewee to disclose more information. This is often used in the treatment of mental disorders, but has little relevance to research.

Definition

Relevance – Pertinence, importance.

***Informal Interviews** These are similar to non-directive interviews in that they encourage the interviewee to discuss issues in depth, but they are usually certain topics that the interviewer wishes to explore.

***Guided Interviews** These possess more structure than formal interviews. The interviewer has certain issues to be addressed. Structured but open ended interviews, allow the interviewer to ask the same questions of each person and prevents the interviewee from going off the subject. They are open ended in that they allow the interviewee to give any answer they wish. As opposed to yes/no type answers.

***Clinical Interviews** are usually structured and open ended and used by psychologists to explore mental disorders.

***Fully Structured Interviews** These are a standard set of questions asked in the same order with all interviewees. They can only choose their answers from a restricted list eg. yes, no, don't know. This type of interview can be conducted face to face or by telephone or post.

***Questionnaire Surveys** Written questions involve the interviewee recording their own answer. This is advantageous in that large amounts of data can be recorded quite cheaply, but the method is only suitable for literate people who are willing to answer the questionnaire, so the sample can often be biased.

Advantages of Interviews

- *Unstructured interviews are responsive to the individual's personality, motives and interests.
- *They can reveal more than structured interviews.
- *Information tends to be more qualitative than quantitative.

Definition

Qualitative – concerned with the richness and quality of data.

Quantitative – concerned with quantity, numbers.

Reliability – The extent to which a measurement or research study finds consistent results across situations and over time.

Valid - True or useful.

- *Structured interviews, where the interviewees have all been asked the same question, allows easy comparison of different responses.
- *Reliability – That is, if two interviewers ask an interviewee the same questions in the same order, they are likely to get the same responses.
- *There is a reasonable probability that the research can be replicated and repeat the same findings using structured interviews.
- *Structured interviews are fairly easy to analyse because data tends to be quantitative. Eg. 40% of people said they did like chocolate.

Limitations of Interviews

- *With unstructured interviews, what the interviewee says is to some extent determined by the interaction between them and the interviewer. For example, the personality and characteristics of the interviewer may affect the way the interviewee responds to questions. This is called **interviewer bias**. Because of this possible bias, the information obtained from the interviewer may be unreliable as it is biased by the interviewer. A simplistic example of this might be – say the interviewer is very anti-smoking. When asking a question such as “Do you think smoking such be allowed in restaurants?”, they may unconsciously make a slight grimace or move away from the interviewee or suggest non-verbally that they do not approve – this may encourage the interviewee to say, “No I don't think it should be allowed in restaurants”.
 - *With unstructured interviews, the information obtained can vary in an unsystematic way. So the data tends to be hard to analyse.
 - *With structured interviews, what the interviewee can say may be constrained and perhaps artificial because of the structure. For example, “Do you smoke?” Yes/No. What if you are a smoker who has been trying very hard to stop for the last year, but yesterday had one cigarette – are you a smoker or not??? A yes/no answer allows no leeway for this type of answer.
 - *There is little of the flexibility of unstructured interviews.
 - *An issue that is common to all interviews is the **social desirability bias**. This is where people try to present a favourable impression of themselves to the interviewer, causing them to answer incorrectly. An example might be an elderly woman who keeps falling over, denying that she drinks as she does not want people to think that she falls because she has drunk too much. By denying she drinks, she is making the research unreliable as she has not answered truthfully.
- There are ways to try and overcome this social desirability bias. This is by using the **lie scale**. Some questions are asked that are intended to allow the interviewer to assess how much the interviewee is telling the truth when giving socially desirable answers. Eg. Do you always tell the truth? An honest answer for most people is probably “No”. If the interviewee answers “yes” to this question and similar questions, the interviewer may start to question the validity of the rest of what the interviewee has said.
- *Interviews only allow us to get information about what the interviewee is consciously aware of. For example, they may not be aware that they are scared of spiders because of a bad experience with one when they were two years old – they may not remember it, so that cannot truthfully say why they are scared of spiders.

*Some interviewers lack the skills and personal qualities necessary to ensure that people open up to them and are willing to answer questions truthfully.

DESIGNING A QUESTIONNAIRE

Read the set task. Think of what you are interested in asking questions about.

Make a list of possible topics, and then discard the ones that you don't want to use.

Ambiguity and Bias

Avoid

*Ambiguous or biased questions A simple example - In the light of the superiority of people with brown hair, do you think everyone should have brown hair?

*Long winded questions – On the understanding that people with brown hair are fundamentally superior to people with brown hair, do you consider, given your understanding of the situation, that everyone should consider the extent to which their hair colour should be changed to the aforementioned colour!??!

*Questions that can be easily misunderstood.

*Questions that will make people defensive.

Closed and Open Questions

*Closed questions require certain answers eg. yes/no/don't know. Whilst open questions allow any response. You need to decide what type of answer you want. If you want detailed information on how someone's phobias, for example, it is no good asking things such as "Are you scared of spiders?" yes/no. What if they are petrified of snakes, but not spiders? What if they just say "Yes"? Does that mean they are a little bit scared of spider or at the other end of the scale, go pale, can't even touch a picture of a spider etc. etc. It is a question of degree.

A way to conquer this kind of issue is to use **Attitude Scales** –

For example –

Do you consider homework? Very unimportant unimportant neutral important very important
The interviewee can then circle their response. The researchers could then say that 50% of respondents thought that homework was very important and only 2% thought it was very unimportant (as an example).

Or you can consider using scales using statements such as

Homework is very important.	Strongly disagree
	Disagree
	Neither agree nor disagree
	Agree
	Strongly agree

Alternatively, you may wish to use closed questions eg.

Is homework important to you? Yes/No.

* After using a questionnaire, remember to debrief the interviewees (ie. tell them what you were researching and allow them to ask you any questions).

* You may like to do a draft questionnaire first, and then use it as a pilot study on one interviewee. This will enable you to see if any questions are ambiguous, hard to understand or unsuitable.

**SELF ASSESMENT.**

Perform the self assessment test titled 'test 1.2' from the online training system. If you find yourself getting the answers wrong, go over the notes from this lesson again or contact your tutor for assistance via the online training system.

SET TASK

Design a questionnaire to find out which behaviours and attributes a particular group of people think are inherited or biological in nature, and which are learned. Your group of respondents can be the elderly, adolescents, new parents, or any other group you choose. Write a one page summary of what you found and your conclusions. Submit your summary, conclusions and the questionnaire with your assignment.

Your questionnaire should include at least 10 questions.

**ASSIGNMENT.**

Download and do the assignment called 'Lesson 1 assignment'.