

## Different Approaches to Psychology

### Areas of Psychology

Psychology, as an academic subject, has been split into a number of different areas. At different times, different areas have seemed more important, as if they took us closer to the core of human experience. Each area or approach has its own supporters or specialists, its own techniques, its own history, etc. These different areas overlap and yet they can be considered separately.

The first two are the most essential for this course.

#### 1. Cognitive Psychology

**Definition:** cognitive psychology is the study of how we take in information and make sense of it – the processes of perception and cognition.

Information generally reaches us by way of one of the five senses. For human beings, the two most important senses are probably sight and hearing, so cognitive psychology looks at the way we see things, e.g. colours and distances, and how we understand the things we hear, etc.

Nevertheless, cognitive psychology goes further than this. It asks how we remember things, how we recognise them, how we interpret them. These are the mental processes of cognition, or simply thinking.

#### 2. Social Psychology

**Definition:** social psychology is concerned with understanding how people act when they are with other people.

This is one of the most popular and interesting areas of psychology – indeed, we all know a little bit about this subject without opening a textbook. Some social psychologists, like Desmond Morris, have focused on body language, others on dress codes, or why people obey those in authority.

This is the area of psychology that overlaps most with sociology, but the psychologist's attention usually stays on the way social interaction reveals something about the workings of the mind. In particular, social psychologists are interested in how we make sense of our social experience. This side of psychology is known as **social cognition**.

### 3. Physiological Psychology

**Definition:** physiological psychology is concerned with the way what we do or think is linked to physical states.

For instance, what are the effects of tiredness or stress on our ability to make decisions? Others might look at the way new drugs affect the brain or at different kinds of brain damage. This is a highly specialised area and will not concern us greatly.

### 4. Developmental Psychology

**Definition:** developmental psychology is concerned with the way people change and grow through their lifetimes.

Our lives can be divided into different phases and each is associated with a different set of experiences, changes and learning processes. Four of the most commonly studied phases are:

- childhood
- adolescence
- adulthood
- old age

Child development psychology is an important subject for a number of professionals, including nurses, nannies and teachers. Parents can often benefit from studying it.

There are a number of overlaps with cognitive psychology, but developmental psychology is concerned with the following issues:

- early socialisation
- cognitive development
- moral and gender development
- the development of the self concept
- developing responses to health problems and stress

### 5. Individual Psychology

**Definition:** individual psychology is concerned with what makes people different from one another.

Two of the main areas in which people differ psychologically from one another are in personality and intelligence. These qualities are notoriously difficult to measure. How do you prove that someone is happier, more creative, or more ambitious than another? What kind of intelligence are we trying to measure?

Many psychologists, including Sir Cyril Burt, have tried to construct 'pure' intelligence tests, which do not have any social or cultural bias, but it is hard to construct such tests fairly. Even then, many would not agree that what we are measuring is 'intelligence', because that is a very emotional term.

It is one thing to observe individuals and point out how one differs from another. It is quite another to generalise about particular groups on the basis of these results. If we say that boys are 'better' at mathematics than girls, for instance, we run into a great deal of trouble. It is even more dangerous to claim that one racial or ethnic group possesses qualities that another does not.

Individual psychology is also often concerned with what motivates different people, and this is often safer ground for psychologists trying to make generalisations.

## **6. Comparative (Animal) Psychology**

**Definition:** comparative psychology is concerned with how human beings differ from other species of animals.

We might say that this branch of psychology is 'comparative' when the real subject is humanity and animals are being examined in order to shed light on human beings, while it is animal psychology if they are being studied in their own right, e.g. what makes some horses keen to win races while others are not interested – a topic of keen interest to racehorse trainers.

This course is mainly concerned with the individual's cognitive processes and with social psychology, so we will look at these areas in a little more detail.

## Self Assessment Test 1

Fill in the missing words:

\_\_\_\_\_ psychology is concerned with how human beings differ from other species of animals.

\_\_\_\_\_ psychology is concerned with the way people change and grow through their lifetimes.

\_\_\_\_\_ psychology is concerned with understanding how people act when they are with other people.

\_\_\_\_\_ psychology is the study of how we take in information and make sense of it – the processes of perception and cognition.

\_\_\_\_\_ psychology is concerned with what makes people different from one another.

\_\_\_\_\_ psychology is concerned with the way what we do or think is linked to physical states.

## Cognitive Psychology

As we have seen, cognitive psychology is the central figure in the family of psychological studies, and a key area of your studies, but it overlaps with all the other areas and is difficult to define precisely.

Here are some of the major topics of cognitive psychology:

- sensory processes and cognition
- perception (including the 'nature–nurture' debate)
- attention
- memory
- learning
- language and thought
- artificial intelligence

This course concentrates on the key areas of perception, memory and learning. However, it is important to point out that all these topics can be approached through the other perspectives. All can be considered in comparative terms, or as aspects of child development, for instance.

## **Social Psychology**

The study of how the individual makes sense of (and relates to) the society in which they live is also extremely broad. Very few of us live in isolation from society and all of us are closely involved with the people around us, so a large part of our experience can be described as 'social'. We will see how inextricably linked the self and society are later in the module.

Amongst the areas of social psychology that have attracted most attention are the following:

- pro- and anti-social behaviour
- evolutionary theory
- interpersonal attraction (love, marriage, etc.)
- attitude change and prejudice
- influence and obedience
- religious observance and other rituals

However, from our point of view, social psychology can be split into three broad areas that cover most of these topics and many others:

- The development of social behaviour
- Social perception
- Social influence

### **Self Assessment Test 2**

Without looking back, name four of the major topics of cognitive psychology.

## Ideas of Self and Society

Most of us have what is called an 'us and them' mentality. On the one hand (we say), there is 'me' in here, thinking this and feeling that, and on the other hand, there are all those other people and things out there – family, friends, enemies, strangers, buildings, trees, etc – that we have to deal with.

Most psychologists would tell us that it is not as simple as that. Your view of yourself can hardly be separated from the society in which you live, while society is viewed through the eyes of the individual.

### Activity 1

How do you think of yourself? What psychological qualities would you attribute to yourself (e.g. trustworthiness, determination, and perfectionism)? What weaknesses?

How would you say you are viewed by society?

Draw up two columns – one for your view of yourself and one for society's view – and write down your list of qualities and weaknesses in each. Do the two lists match? Why are they different? Which would you say presents the more 'positive' picture?

Your view of yourself	Society's view of you

## **The Self-Concept**

Each one of us carries round internally our own personal idea of ourselves. This is something that is known as the **self-concept**. Most of us would like to think that we have a reasonably accurate picture of our own abilities and personal qualities; however, psychologists have found that the link between real, measurable qualities and our impression of our own personal 'worth' is pretty thin. We think too much or too little of ourselves, and one of the main factors in how we see ourselves is how other people see us.

This is not very surprising. A pop star becomes famous and suddenly everybody is telling them they are marvellous. People start to ignore their defects and may well be sycophantic in their presence. They are surrounded by admiration, even adulation. Soon, they start to believe that they really are just as marvellous as their fans say they are. Then the bubble bursts and they are sent back into obscurity. It can be very hard to keep one's self-worth in perspective through that kind of change. The pop star may have all the same qualities and abilities they had when they were famous but suddenly they seem to be illusory or worthless. Their self-esteem has been destroyed and they may well feel less positive about themselves than they did before they became famous.

In general terms, it is agreed that the more positive our self-concept is, the happier we are likely to be. Much psychotherapy is concerned with an attempt to rebuild the self-concept after some particularly damaging experience.

**Cooley** (1902) described self-concept as the 'looking-glass self', i.e. we see ourselves as if we were reflected in the eyes of other people. We are profoundly affected by what we think they are thinking.

## **The Self-fulfilling Prophecy**

The ideas other people have about us often become a self-fulfilling prophecy. If they expect us to do well, we often do, and if they expect us to fail, this is exactly what happens.

## Activity 2

Can you think of an experiment that would help us test the truth of the idea of the self-fulfilling prophecy?

**Rosenthal and Jacobsen** (1968) found a simple way of testing the power of the self-fulfilling prophecy. They went into an ordinary American school and gave the class a 'special' kind of intelligence test. It was only an ordinary test but they selected a number of children whose performance in the test was about average. Instead of speaking to the children directly, they allowed the class teacher to 'overhear' a conversation in which they named these average children as ones who, on the basis of this test, were likely to make special progress in the coming year.

When they came back a year later, they found that, sure enough, those children were now near the top of their classes. Because the teachers had believed that these children would do well, they had (unconsciously, at least) given them special attention and encouragement. This had improved the self-concept of the children concerned and encouraged them to work harder to live up to all those revised expectations.

## Other Ideas of Self

Psychologists often split the self-concept in two. On one side is the **self-image**. This is our attempt to describe the sort of person we are and what we can do – a neutral list of what makes us different from other people. **Self-esteem**, on the other hand, is our estimation of our own worth. Are we good, bad or indifferent?

However, there are other kinds of self that emerge from the interaction between the self and the group of people of which the individual is part. Human beings have an important need for **self-actualisation**. This means 'making real' the different parts of ourselves, developing our interests and abilities. Different people do this in different ways. One person might build model aeroplanes, take golf lessons or study a psychology course; another might ask out the prettiest girls in the class. This is all to the good and enables most people to improve or sustain their self-concept.

However, problems can emerge if the need for self-actualisation is repressed. Perhaps you are locked in a prison cell, with no outlet for your creative ener-

gies, or your self-esteem is so low that you lack the confidence to make a start on the challenges that confront you, so you crawl back into your shell. We need to continue 'growing' psychologically, just to maintain our self-concept.

**Self-awareness** is another quality usually associated with the healthy personality. This is the ability to understand and accept different aspects of our personality, the bad points as well as the good. This makes it easier for us to live our lives on the basis of conscious choice and to control our own destinies.

Most of us suppress our own awareness of things that we don't feel very happy about, but it may be possible to achieve a different, more positive kind of awareness. Instead of seeing the feature in negative terms, it may be possible to view it positively and turn it to one's advantage. Stubbornness can be redefined as drive and determination, meanness can be thought of as good money-management, shyness as sensitivity, etc.

Thus, our ideas of self are very often affected or controlled by the people around us. The most important people, who affect us most in this respect, are our families and other members of our peer group.

Our **peer group** is the set of individuals who have reached a similar stage in their development – for instance, the other members of our class, workmates of the status or friends of our own age. These are the people we want to impress most and who can hurt us most by withholding their approval.

### **Activity 3**

How would you define your own peer-group?

Are there particular individuals that you look to for approval? How often do those individuals change?

In what ways do you find yourself responding to peer-group pressure? Is your choice of clothes a result of this pressure? Have you ever found yourself doing something disagreeable because of peer group pressure, for instance “ganging up” against some outsider?

Do you feel that you are doing better or worse than other members of your peer-group? Is there a direct link between this and your self-esteem?

## Summary

