

1 Introduction: The Foundations of Psychology

Looking at the Word Psychology: From Ancient to Modern Meanings

The word psychology has had several different meanings from ancient to modern times. Here is its present definition: Psychology is the science that studies the behaviour of organisms. This definition should guide you throughout your study of this book. Three words in the definition merit special attention: (1) science, (2) behaviour, and (3) organisms. Modern psychology is considered a science because it bases its conclusions on data, information obtained by systematic observations. The research methods used by psychology are covered in chapter 2.

Behaviour has three aspects: (1) cognitive processes, (2) emotional states, and 3) actions. Cognitive processes refer to what an individual thinks. Emotional states refer to what an individual feels. Actions refer to what an individual does. An organism is any living creature. Consequently, the behaviour of dogs, rats, pigeons, and monkeys can be legitimately included in the study of psychology. Such organisms have indeed been subjects in psychology experiments. However, traditionally the principal focus of psychology has been humans. When animals are used in experiments, the implicit goal is often to explore how such basic processes as learning and motivation, as studied in animals, can cast a light on our understanding of human behaviour.

(a) What does psychology study?

(b) What are the three aspects of behaviour?

Answers: (a) The behaviour of organisms; (b) Cognitive processes, emotional states, and actions. Although you now know the modern definition of psychology, it is important to realize that the word psychology has its roots in ancient meanings associated with philosophy. The Greek word psyche means soul. Consequently, to philosophers living 400 to 300 B.C., psychology was the “study of the soul.” This was the meaning given by Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. In view of the fact that these thinkers, particularly Socrates and Plato, did not believe that animals have souls, it becomes evident why for many centuries psychology’s main attention has been

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given to human beings. The ancient philosophers asserted that the soul is the seat of consciousness. It is consciousness that makes mental life possible. This is why psychology is often thought of as the science of the mind. Indeed, this meaning is the one given to it by William James, the dean of American psychologists. Working at Harvard a little more than one hundred years ago,

James defined psychology as “the science of mental life.” He believed that the purpose of psychology should be to investigate such mental processes as thinking, memory, and perception. (There is more about James later in this chapter). This is where we stand now. Although psychology no longer is thought of as the study of the soul, this original meaning colors our present-day approach, with its emphasis on human behaviour and the importance of cognition.

(a) The Greek word psyche means .

(b) William James defined psychology as .

Answers: (a) soul; (b) the science of mental life.

Contemporary, scientific psychology has four explicit goals: (1) describe,

(2) explain, (3) predict, and (4) control behaviour. These goals are the same common-

sense goals that we all use in everyday life. Let’s say that Jane tells her husband, Harry, that their son, seven-year-old Billy, was a brat today. Is this a good description of Billy’s behaviour? No, it’s not. It’s too general, too abstract. On the other hand, let’s assume that Jane says that Billy refused to do his homework and told her, “Homework is stupid. I’m not going to do it anymore.” This constitutes a much better description of behaviour because it is specific and concrete. Similar specific descriptions may suggest to both parents that Billy misbehaves more than most children. Jane and Harry now wonder why Billy is beginning to misbehave more and more. Is he frustrated? Does he have an inferiority complex?

Does he have low self-esteem? Does he have Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD)?

Does he have an imbalance of certain key neurotransmitters in his brain? Does he have a childhood neurosis?

As you can see, potential explanations are plentiful. They have to be evaluated. This is where prediction and control come in. Let’s say that Dr. Helen G., the family paediatrician, suggests that Billy is indeed suffering from Attention Deficit Disorder. Let’s also assume that Dr. G. is convinced that Billy eats too many foods with refined sugar and that this causes, through a complex biochemical reaction, a depletion of certain neurotransmitters. She recommends a diet of natural foods with little refined sugar. The physician is predicting that the change in diet will take away the undesirable symptoms. Let’s say that the diet is tried. Billy sticks to it. If there is no change in Billy’s misbehaviour after several weeks, both Dr. G. and the parents will conclude that the explanation was incorrect. On the other hand, if the diet is

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behaviour becomes more manageable, then control has taken place. The
explanation will appear to be adequate. The four goals of scientific
psychology are .

Answer: to describe, explain, predict, and control behaviour.