

# AN INTRODUCTION TO PSYCHOLOGY

As human beings our curiosity drives us to know the reasons behind various events happening around us. Whenever we meet somebody or see someone doing something we immediately try to understand as to why this person is doing this kind of activity. Similarly we often try to understand our own experiences and behaviors in different situations. The eagerness and curiosity guide us to think as to how people are different from each other in terms of their intellect, aptitude and temperament: Why do they become happy or sad? How do they become friendly or develop antagonistic relationships? How do some people learn anything quickly while others take relatively more time? The answer to all these questions may be given by a novice as well as a person who has learned psychology. The answer of the novice can be guided by common sense but a psychologist can study the reasons behind such activities in a systematic way and can provide scientific answers to these questions which can be tested time and again. In this lesson we will try to understand the nature and scope of psychology in detail

## OBJECTIVES

After studying this lesson, you will be able to:

- explain the nature of psychology and its definition;
- describe the scope of psychology;
- elaborate the basic psychological processes; and
- explain the fields of psychology.

## 1.1 NATURE OF PSYCHOLOGY AND ITS DEFINITION

In simple words psychology is a systematic and scientific study of mental processes, experiences and behaviors - both overt and covert. The word 'psychology' has its origin in two Greek words 'psyche' and 'logos'. The word 'psyche' in Greek language refers to 'spirit' or 'soul' and the word 'logos' refers to 'discourse' or 'study'. During earlier times it was considered as a discipline which deals with the study of soul. In India the study of such questions was the main concern during Vedic and Upanishad period. Various aspects of mental processes were analyzed. Subsequently the schools of Yoga, Samkhya, Vedanta, Nyaya, Buddhism, and Jainism provided detailed accounts of mind, mental processes and methods to control mind. In modern period it started at Calcutta University in 1916 with establishment of the Department of Psychology.

## 1.2 HISTORY OF PSYCHOLOGY

In the western world, the formal beginning of psychology as an independent discipline goes back to 1879 when **Wilhelm Wundt** established the first experimental laboratory at the University of Leipzig, in Germany. Since then the growth of psychology has covered a long journey. Today it is one of the very popular subjects among social sciences. It studies all the shades of experiences, mental processes and behaviors. A comprehensive analysis of all these aspects provides a scientific understanding of human nature.

### **1.3 DEFINITIONS OF PSYCHOLOGY**

In the following sections we will try to understand all the components which collectively define psychology.

#### **(A) Study of experience**

Psychologists study a variety of human experiences which are mainly personal or private in nature. They may range from experiences of dream, conscious experiences at different stages of life and experiences when the consciousness is altered through meditation or use of psychedelic drugs. The study of such experiences helps the psychologist to understand the personal world of the individual.

#### **(B) Study of mental processes**

Psychology as the study of mental processes tries to investigate the activities happening in the brain which are primarily non physiological in nature. These mental processes include perception, learning, remembering and thinking. These are internal mental activities which are not directly observed but inferred from the behavioral activities of the person. For example, we can say that somebody is thinking if he or she displays certain activities related to finding solution to a mathematical problem assigned to him or her.

#### **(C) Study of behavior**

The range of behaviors studied in psychology is very broad. It includes simple reflexes (e.g. eye blinking), common response patterns such as talking to friends, verbal reports about feelings and internal states and complex behaviors such as handling computers, playing piano and addressing a crowd. These behaviors are either observed directly through naked eyes or are measured through instruments. They are generally exhibited verbally or nonverbally (e.g. facial expression) when an individual reacts to a stimulus in a given situation. Thus in psychology the main unit of investigation is the individual human being and his or her experiences, mental processes and behaviors.

### **1.4 BASIC PSYCHOLOGICAL PROCESSES**

While studying behavior it is one of the most important tasks for psychologists to

understand the processes which collectively influence a particular behaviour. These psychological processes are

**(A) Sensation:** It refers to our awareness about various stimuli which we encounter in different modalities such as vision, hearing, touch and taste.

**(B) Attention:** During attention we selectively focus on a particular stimulus among many stimuli available to us. For instance while listening to a lecture in the classroom we attend to the words pronounced by the teacher and, try to ignore the other stimuli present in the classroom, such as noise made by the fan.

**(C) Perception:** In the case of perception we process information and make out the meaning of the stimuli available to us. For example, we look at a pan and recognize it as an object used for cooking.

**(D) Learning:** It helps us acquiring new knowledge and skills through experience and practice. The acquired knowledge and skills further bring a relative change in our behavior and facilitate our adjustment in varied settings. For example, we learn language, riding a bicycle and applying mathematical skills to solve various problems.

**(E) Memory:** The information we process and learn is registered and stored in the memory system. Memory also helps us to easily retrieve the stored information when it is required for use. For example, writing the answers in the examination after studying for the paper.

**(F) Thinking:** In the case of thinking we use our stored knowledge to solve various tasks. We logically establish the relationships among various objects in our mind and take rational decision for a given problem. We also evaluate different events of the environment and accordingly form an opinion.

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