

Module: Psychological Foundations of Mental Health

Week 1

Introduction to cognitive psychology

Topic 1

Foundations of cognitive psychology from Plato to Pavlov – Part 1 of 3

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Lecture transcript

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Let's start with some basic definitions. As in all disciplines, psychology has its own jargon-- technical words developed and devised specifically for the communication of ideas and information to other psychologists. However, we also use words and terms that are in everyday use but use them in a more specific way. But this can sometimes cause confusion, so it's important always to be aware of definitions.

The word "cognition" has both an everyday and a specific definition. In its everyday use, a cognition is another word for an individual thought. In psychology, however, it has a more specific and more detailed definition and usage.

It is a term applied to all forms of mental processes-- conscious and unconscious, deliberate and automatic. The term covers processes involved in a range of areas or domains of function including perception and memory, the understanding of language, how we identify the objects in our world, how we form and use concepts, interpret events, ascribe meaning, make judgments and decisions, solve problems, plan, and so on-- essentially, everything that allows us to function within the world. This list and more forms what psychologists place in the category of cognition.

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It follows, therefore, that cognitive psychology is the branch of the subject devoted to the scientific study of these mental and cognitive processes. Cognitive psychology seeks to identify and understand the internal representations and structures that underlie our conscious and unconscious cognitions. We will come back to these terms and what they mean in more detail later in the week.

Cognitive psychology is based on building theoretical descriptions or models of cognitive structures and processes. Because we cannot observe them directly, the structures and processes can be considered hypothetical constructs. Their existence in nature is inferred from a combination of testable theory and experimental study. This is the definition of "cognitive psychology" that we will use in the programme. Cognitive psychology is one branch of psychology-- although arguably, the dominant school of the later 20th century and 21st century.

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Before moving on, it is important to note that cognitive psychology is just one of a group of related disciplines collectively called “cognitive science”. When we talk about cognitive psychology, we are mainly referring to experimental cognitive psychology. However, its subjects of study-- such as attention, memory, decision-making, and so on-- have, since the mid-20th century, also been the focus of other emerging areas of science. These include the study of brain mechanisms and functional cognitive neuroscience, computers and artificial intelligence, and psycholinguistics.

These different areas, once largely separate, have grown closer and closer-- building on each other's theories, methods, and findings to form evermore integrated models of the mind and how it works. This integration is often called the “cognitive revolution.” It started in the middle of the 20th century but continues to this day. In this programme, across the various modules, you will be learning mainly about two of these areas-- experimental cognitive psychology and cognitive neuroscience and their relevance to mental health.