

INTRODUCTION

What is psychology?

Views on what psychology is all about have altered over the centuries. However, the most common definition of **psychology** over the past 80 years or so has been that it is the scientific study of behaviour. This view was expressed forcefully by supporters of **behaviourism** (an approach to psychology put forward by John Watson and other American psychologists in the early years of the twentieth century). The key argument of the behaviourists was that the best way for psychology to become a science was to focus on behaviour, which can be observed and measured.

Before the start of behaviourism, most psychologists argued that psychology should be based on people's reports of their thoughts and feelings. This approach is known as **introspection**. It was dismissed by the behaviourists as unscientific, because we cannot observe and measure mental processes.

The approach favoured by the behaviourists is rather limited in various ways (see Chapter 7). Most psychologists are actually interested not so much in behaviour itself, but in the internal processes producing that behaviour. For example, psychologists studying the extreme reactions of anxious patients to stressful circumstances do not only focus on their patients' anxious behaviour. They are mainly interested in understanding *why* anxious patients behave as they do. Thus, contemporary psychology can be regarded as a scientific discipline designed to understand why humans and other species behave in the ways that they do.

The task of understanding human (and animal) behaviour is a challenging one. An important reason for this is because our behaviour is typically determined by several different factors, including the following:

- The specific stimuli presented to us.
- Our genetic endowment: what we have inherited from our parents.
- Our physiological system.
- Our cognitive system (our perceptions, thoughts, and memories).
- The social environment.
- The cultural environment.
- Our previous life experiences (including those of childhood).
- Our personal characteristics (including intelligence, personality, and mental health).

We can see more clearly how our behaviour is determined by many factors if we consider a concrete example. There has been much interest in recent years in "road rage". This is a phenomenon in which a motorist becomes

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What is the science of psychology actually about?

KEY TERMS

Psychology: a scientific discipline designed to understand the behaviour of humans and other species.

Behaviourism: an approach to psychology started in the United States by John Watson, according to which psychologists should focus on observable stimuli and responses.

Introspection: study of the human mind based on people's reports of their thoughts and feelings.

uncontrollably angry and starts physically attacking another motorist who has frustrated him or her in some way. How can we understand the behaviour of a man who exhibits road rage? His behaviour may depend in part on the genes that he has inherited, which may have given him a very aggressive personality. It may depend in part on his childhood experiences, for example, the presence of violence within the family. It may depend in part on the man's clinical history. He may, for example, have a history of psychopathic or antisocial behaviour. It may depend on his thoughts and feelings (e.g., the other motorist reminds him of someone he despises). It may depend on the man's physiological state. For example, his internal bodily state may be highly aroused and agitated because he is already late for an important appointment. Finally, it may depend on cultural factors: Expressing one's aggression by physically attacking someone is less acceptable in some cultures than others.

The key point of this example is that there is no single "correct" interpretation of the man's road rage. Almost certainly, most of the factors just discussed contributed to his behaviour. Thus, the scope of psychology is very broad, because it needs to be if we are to understand human behaviour. More generally, psychology is a multidisciplinary science, which has been enriched by physiologists, neuroscientists, sociologists, biologists, biochemists, anthropologists, and others.

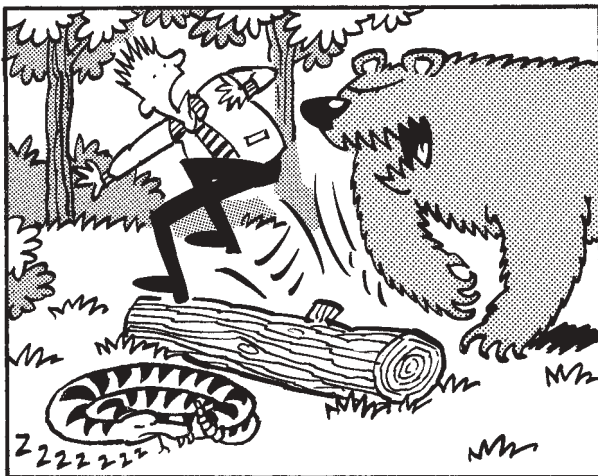
"Psychology is just common sense"

Why is common sense of limited usefulness?

Most people feel that they have an understanding of psychology as a result of their daily dealings with other people. One of the main tasks of psychologists is to predict behaviour, and the prediction of behaviour is also important in everyday life. The better we can anticipate how people will react in any given situation, the more contented and rewarding our social interactions are likely to be.

The fact that most people are amateur psychologists has led to the tendency to underestimate the achievements of psychology. If the findings of psychology are in line with common sense, it can be argued that they tell us nothing we didn't already know. On the other hand, if the findings disagree with common sense, a frequent reaction is, "I don't believe it!"

There are various problems with the view that psychology is no better than common sense. It is misleading to assume that common sense forms a coherent set of assumptions about behaviour. This can easily be seen if we consider the commonsensical views contained in proverbs. It is possible to think of several pairs of proverbs that express opposite meanings to each other. For example, "Look before you leap" can be contrasted with, "He who hesitates is lost", and "Many hands make light work" is the opposite of "Too many cooks spoil the broth". Since common sense involves such incompatible views, it can't be used as a sound basis for understanding human behaviour.



Common sense can be contradictory: "Look before you leap" vs. "He who hesitates is lost".