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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

**Notes**

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 Upanishadic period. Various aspects of mental processes were analyzed. Subsequently the schools of Yoga, Samkhya, Vedant, 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.

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 behaviours. A comprehensive analysis of all these aspects provides a scientific understanding of human nature. 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 behavioural 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 behaviour

The range of behaviours 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 behaviours such as handling computers, playing piano and addressing a crowd. These behaviours 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 behaviours.

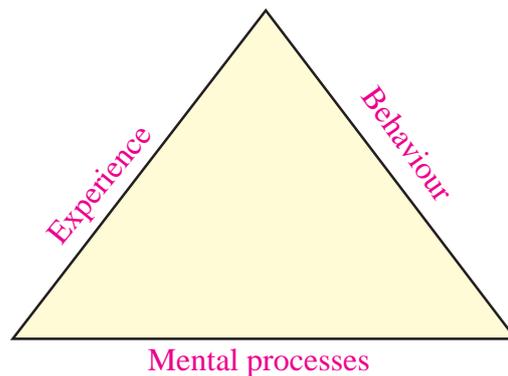


Fig. 1.1: Aspects of the subject matter of psychology



INTEXT QUESTIONS 1.1

1. Fill in the blanks:

- The word 'psychology' has its origin in two Greek words _____ and _____.
- The main unit of investigation in psychology is the individual _____.
- Wilhelm Wundt established the first experimental _____ at the University of Leipzig, in Germany.
- Psychology is the study of _____, _____, and _____.

1.2 SCOPE OF PSYCHOLOGY

From the definition of psychology now it might be clear to you that psychology addresses a variety of issues related to mental and behavioural functioning of an individual. Such a study helps us to develop a basic understanding about human nature and facilitates us to deal with a number of personal and social problems.

The study of human beings starts with the functioning of biological systems especially the nervous system. Under central nervous system psychology studies the functions of various parts of brain which regulate our feelings, emotions and thinking. Within autonomic nervous system the role of hormones and neurotransmitters in determining our behavior is important. In addition psychology studies as to how a given socio-cultural environment interacts with innate biological, intellectual and social attributes of the child and facilitates healthy development of the child.

**Notes**

As a living organism you encounter a lot of sensory input every moment. Your task is not only to process that information but to store and retrieve it when it is required to be used. Attention and perception help to process information. Memory helps us to register, retain and retrieve information, and thinking provides us the ability to manipulate and improve the stored information. Within psychology, all these are studied under the domain of higher mental processes or cognition.

In your life you must have come across many persons who have reached highest level of accomplishment. But such an accomplishment is not attained at once; it is the result of continuous learning in which the individual acquires the necessary skills and competencies through regular practice. Psychology helps us to understand the processes involved in reaching this high level of accomplishment.

In order to understand the purpose behind any kind of behaviour psychologists use the concept of motivation. It primarily focuses on the investment of mental energy and consistency of effort towards achieving the set goals. The various shades of feelings such as anger, fear, love, joy, and sadness which we experience during the course of our life are studied within the realm of emotion.

You will certainly agree that no two individuals are the same in terms of their physical attributes such as height, weight, skin colour or facial features as well as psychological attributes such as intelligence, personality, temperament and interest. An understanding of these and other aspects of individual differences facilitates the psychologist to select right person for the right job and to provide guidance and counseling for various matters of personal as well as professional concern. The understanding of individual differences also helps the psychologist to differentiate between normative (customary, accepted) and abnormal (deviant, unusual) behaviors.

Thus psychology as a discipline has a vast scope. It not only studies human beings across the life span but also tries to explore mental processes and potentials in order to facilitate achieving a better quality of life.

Activity 1**The Power of Positive Thinking: Health and Happiness**

By thinking and saying positive thoughts to yourself and others, you can gradually create a positive change in yourself as well as in others. Try this exercise with your friends or family members. Ask your friends as to how many of them are in a 'positive' mood and how many in a 'negative' mood. Then instruct your friends to shake hands with others and genuinely say " I wish you happiness and good health" . Again ask your friends about their mood, to see how many report 'positive' and how many 'negative'. Yes, you will be surprised - the number of reported 'positive' moods has gone up.



1.3 BASIC PSYCHOLOGICAL PROCESSES

While studying behaviour 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 pen and recognize it as an object used for writing.
- (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.



INTEXT QUESTIONS 1.2

1. State whether the following statements are True or False:
 - a. In learning we acquire new skills through training and experience.
 - b. In sensation stimuli are stored in the brain.
 - c. In thinking we use stored knowledge to solve various tasks.
 - d. In attention we attend to all the stimuli present in the environment.



1.4 FIELDS OF PSYCHOLOGY

During its journey of more than a hundred years, psychology as a field of enquiry has grown in many directions. In contemporary times a number of specialized fields with focused area of application have developed. The emergence of different fields in psychology indicates the importance and relevance of these areas in our daily life. In this section we will briefly learn about some of these fields.

Abnormal Psychology: This branch of psychology tries to describe, assess, predict and control those categories of behaviours which are considered as unusual and non-normative. It also deals with various categories of psychological disorders which affect the mental health of the individual. It assesses abnormality in the individual through standardized psycho-diagnostic tools and suggests problem specific treatment.

Cognitive Psychology: It deals with acquisition, storage, transformation and application of information the individual uses to understand and interpret events happening around him/her.

Clinical and Counseling Psychology: Clinical psychology is primarily concerned with diagnosis and treatment of various psychological disorders. A clinical psychologist is trained in psychotherapeutic techniques which are used to treat people suffering from psychological disorders. They are employed in hospitals and clinics dealing with mental health problems. The counseling psychologist deals with mild problems pertaining to adjustment in social and emotional life, and provides specialized services to deal with marital problems, stress oriented problems and career choice.

Educational Psychology: This field of psychology is mainly concerned with academic performance. It studies the role of various factors which influence learning processes in classroom setting. It focuses on assessing the aptitude, skills and intellectual potential of the students and evaluating their performance. An educational psychologist also helps students to overcome learning difficulties.

Environmental Psychology: This field is concerned with the study of interaction between physical environment and human behaviour. It studies the impact of noise, heat, humidity, pollution and crowding on human performance. It also focuses on the impact of physical environment on psychological health of individuals.

Health Psychology: This field focuses on the impact of various psychological factors (e.g. stress) on the onset progress and treatment of illness. It also deals with various life style diseases such as hypertension, coronary heart disease, cancer and diabetes.

Organizational Psychology: This field is concerned with application of psychological principles and models to study the selection and performance of

employees in organizational settings. It also studies the concepts of leadership, motivation, job satisfaction and performance appraisal.

Developmental Psychology: This field is concerned with the study of various physical and psychological factors which influence the systematic changes which the individual experiences across the different stages of life.

Emerging Fields: In addition to the fields mentioned above a number of new areas have emerged. Some of these fields are sports psychology, military psychology, aviation psychology, forensic psychology, peace psychology, neuropsychology, political psychology, feminist psychology and positive psychology.



INTEXT QUESTIONS 1.3

1. Describe any two fields of psychology and indicate their applications.



WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNT

- Psychology is a systematic and scientific study of mental processes, experiences and behaviors - both overt and covert – as they take place in a socio-cultural setting.
- In India the study of soul/consciousness was the main concern during Vedic and Upanishadic period.
- The formal beginning of psychology was in 1879 when Wilhelm Wundt established the first experimental laboratory at the University of Leipzig, in Germany.
- The scope of psychology is wide as it addresses a variety of issues related to mental and behavioral functioning of the individuals.
- Study of psychology helps us to develop a basic understanding about human nature and facilitates dealing with a number of personal and social problems.
- The various psychological processes that are involved in human behavior are sensation, attention, perception, learning, memory, and thinking.
- Psychology has a number of specialized fields of study. Each field helps us understand human behavior in specific domain.



**Notes****TERMINAL QUESTIONS**

1. Define psychology. With the help of examples explain the different components of this definition.
2. Explain the various psychological processes which influence human behavior. Support your answer with relevant examples.
3. Describe four different fields of psychology. Which field of psychology interests you the most? Give reasons.

**ANSWERS TO INTEXT QUESTIONS****1.1**

1. Psyche, logos
2. Human being
3. Laboratory
4. Experiences, mental processes, behaviors

1.2

1. True
2. False
3. True
4. False

1.3 Refer to section 1.4**Hints for Terminal Questions**

1. Refer to section 1.3
2. Refer to section 1.5
3. Refer to section 1.6