

I find that many non-psychologists don't have a very clear idea of what the study of psychology involves. When you say that you are a psychologist, people often seem to assume that you are a psychiatrist, or seem to feel that you are someone who knows the answers to human personal and social problems, or, sometimes, people would, half jokingly, half suspiciously, say, "You are a psychologist? Tell me then what I am thinking about!"

Nothing could be more disconcerting to an ordinary hard-working, conscience-stricken psychologist struggling with the problems of the independent and dependent variables in an attempt to assess the complex human behaviour - but then, I suppose, there are some specific professional hazards in any profession. The study of psychology consists of many branches. The names of these branches and what is included in them vary somewhat from country to country because of some specific pathways along which the study of psychology has developed in each, but the main branches of psychology usually are: physiological psychology; cognitive psychology; social psychology; child development; animal learning; cross-cultural psychology; environmental psychology; industrial psychology; psycholinguistics; personality; motivation and emotion; gerontology - in no particular order. Usually a psychologist specializes in one or more of these branches, but may, more often than not, have a knowledge of one or more of the related fields. For instance, a social psychologist may undertake personal research and have a teaching knowledge also in the fields of cross-cultural psychology, or industrial psychology, or environmental psychology, and even child psychology.

There exists also a branch of clinical (or 'medical') psychology which has developed relatively recently and in which the specialization takes a somewhat different route from that in other branches. This is a branch of psychology which is closest to psychiatry and often, but not always, involves the practical aspects such as working with patients. There are some branches of psychology which normally exist outside of the usual teaching institutions - Universities and Polytechnics - such as parapsychology (the study of the ESP), and there are some, for instance, educational psychology, which often 'belong' within an institution, not to the Department of Psychology, but to the Department of Education.

There exist various sub-branches within each branch of psychology. For instance, physiological psychology may include neuropsychology and comparative psychology. Some new branches of psychology are being constantly developed due to the pressure of some local needs, sometimes at different times in different countries - for instance, sports psychology. In the last few decades a new experimental field - the psychology of humour - is being developed with the five International Conferences on this topic to date having taken place but, as yet, with no separate Journal in this particular area. Usually a new branch of psychology is considered established and 'independent' with the establishment of a Journal, published monthly or at some intervals, in this area or else, when a major textbook would include a separate chapter with a heading for this area. For instance, a social psychologist, Solomon Asch, had included in his textbook on social psychology a chapter on 'person perception' in 1952, the area in which he was very interested and had done some research. Since then, every textbook in social psychology has included a separate chapter on this area as an independent area of social psychology dealing with the ways (including the possible errors and biases) in which one person perceives and judges the other person in social encounters. Some areas within each branch of psychology may, over time, diminish in prominence due to the lack of interest among the researchers or, more often, due to the empirical and theoretical difficulties hampering the research in that particular field - only to spring back to life later with new vigour and new and promising results. It may so happen then that these newly-developed areas would be included in the textbooks under the separate headings rather than under an old and established one to which they logically belong. For instance, the area of nonverbal behaviour and nonverbal communication dealing with the impact of the nonverbal cues (such as the distance at which you stand from the other person in a conversation, or the clothes that you wear) on the impressions that we form of the others, or the area of attribution dealing with the causes that we assigned to the observed behaviour of the others ("Is she greedy or simply hungry?") or even to our own ("Am I really nasty or was I provoked?") - both of which have developed vigorously in the last two decades, are normally included in the textbooks under their own headings rather than under the heading of 'person perception'. Such doings are, perhaps, inevitable in a developing science but can be quite confusing at first to a beginner in psychology!

So can a psychologist say what we are thinking about? Does she or he know the answers to our questions and problems? Of course, many branches of psychology deal with the functioning of the human organism, with the functioning of the brain and the nervous system, with the functioning of memory, with the conditions for effective learning and re-learning. But I am a social psychologist and I had better stick to my

own field. I find it, perhaps inevitably, the most fascinating, intriguing, challenging and complex branch of psychology. If I tell you that John is a helpful and warm person, would you assume that John is also kind and honest, and if so, why? If I tell you that Mary is intelligent, truthful, shy, polite and helpful, would you think better of Mary than if I tell you only that Mary is intelligent and truthful? Chris is clever, cold and helpful - what would you make of him? When you are a little frightened by a horror film, would you feel more attracted to a person you came within to see it than if you both saw a boring documentary? Why? Why the comrades in war, or in the expeditions (or in a college!) feel they've made life-lasting friendships? If you see someone in trouble, would you feel more inclined to help when you are alone than when there are other people present - or vice versa? When you say one thing and do the other, would you be troubled by your inconsistency and, therefore, change your initial attitudes - or not? When I organise a public debate, would I let a candidate I am supporting speak last or first - which is better? Can we find out? When I am rude, I say I am provoked; when someone else is rude, I say that person is ill-mannered - or do I? When I visit my friends' house and step on a cat's old saucer, I say it's an accident and think no more of it; when I knock off the table their expensive antique vase, I feel guilty and they blame me - should I? should they? Would saying to a child (or adult!) "you are stupid" make her or him less efficient in the future than saying "you haven't tried hard enough"? If I fail in some task, would my thinking that it is all my fault make me feel more depressed and passive than my thinking it was others' fault? Or wouldn't it? When would be what? Would my asking a person of 80 in a nursing home to look after her own room herself, to specify the times at which her visitors could come and to listen to my troubles make that person's memory and physical health improve, or a decline in old age is inevitable? And, after all, what is emotion, what function does it serve? Would it make me feel better if I express my anger at least in my face than if I assume a 'blank' expression? If the former, would it be the same for everybody or just some of us? Whom? And why do people laugh, why do they like humour? What does it do for them?

Fascinating. I find many of my students, as myself in my time, come to study psychology because they want "to learn about oneself and the other people". Yes, you do learn that, quite a bit. But you learn above all, I find, what you do not know, that is, a caution in jumping to conclusions about yourself or the others. Since about the sixties, the experimental approaches to psychology, including social psychology, have been developing most vigorously. This has produced a verifiable research evidence capable of replication by anyone else, but also created its own fascinating problems of the methods by which complex behaviour could be measured quantitatively rather than be a subject only for a philosophical speculation. And while psychology can not, should not and does not do away with the philosophical and theoretical assessment of its inferences, the experimental approach to psychology allows us now to say to any irresponsible theory-maker: "If you claim that man's aggression is biologically determined; that there is no difference between man and animal apart from the amount of hair; that a child's attachment occurs only to her or his mother and only in the early years of infancy; that the most important years for later life are the first five; that my opinion of myself depends solely on what the others think of me; that human consciousness operates by adding and subtracting some composite elements akin to a computer - show experimentally that your view is right at least with 95% of confidence, and I would agree with you if I and others can repeat your results. Before that, excuse me, it would only be one person's opinion".

Some people, I feel, may sometimes experience something akin to resentment towards psychology, feeling that it attempts to find out the 'truth' about them behind their backs. But no! Psychology is nothing like that. There is no 'truth' behind what psychology finds - perhaps, the concept of truth is too simple a concept for the complex study of the complex human organism and its behaviour. Psychology does help to understand behaviour more, or to find more ways of understanding it, but, perhaps, psychology will never become a 'mature' science if maturity is defined as finding the 'truth'. Whatever psychology is now, I like reminding myself that a man in his totality is, and always will be, a far more complex, far more capable 'truth-finder' than any branch of science he creates in his aid, and, therefore, would always lead a science along the pathways most beneficial for his well-being and should, I believe, always resist any attempts at having it the other way around.