

Overt behaviour or subjective experience?

What should psychologists study?

Many psychologists would accept a definition of their discipline as being 'the scientific study of mind and behaviour'. The apparent simplicity of this definition hides a number of difficulties that surround any attempt to apply the methods of science to the mind. We can distinguish between **overt behaviour**, the things that people can be observed to do, and the **private experiences** taking place in their mind. The radical **behaviourists** of the early 20th Century believed that only overt behaviour could objectively be studied using the methods of science. They concluded from this that private experience was irrelevant and should not be studied at all.

Can we really restrict ourselves to studying just behaviour?

This position is attractive because it simplifies a difficult problem. However, it is unsatisfactory for at least two reasons. First, the behaviourists failed in their attempts to remove mental states from psychology. They tried very hard to reduce all of human behaviour to environmental stimuli and observable behaviours but ultimately they kept finding things that could not be explained without assuming that some unobservable, mental process was at work, even in non-human animals. Tolman (1934) used food rewards to teach rats to run through mazes. The more often they solved the maze, the more often they were reinforced and they gradually got faster at it. The maze was then flooded. The rats were able to solve it swimming, even though they had never swum it before. This contradicts the behaviourist view which would predict that the rats would need to relearn the flooded maze as the behavioural responses involved in swimming are distinct from those involved in running. Later studies showed that rats would learn their way around the maze even without reinforcement. All of this implies that the rats were creating a 'mental map' of the maze they could use to navigate it. Rats have mental processes.

In humans, it is Chomsky (1959) who is generally regarded as having presented the arguments that defeated behaviourism. The behaviourist account of language is that we acquire it through operant conditioning – each word is a unit of verbal behaviour whose production is governed by environmental stimuli through reinforcement and punishment. Chomsky argued that this view could not explain the creativity of language – that each of us is capable of creating utterances that we have never heard before. Chomsky showed that understanding and producing language required reference to mental processes in ways that behaviourism did not allow.

A second argument against the view that 'only behaviour can be studied objectively' is that the 'objective' descriptions that psychologists supply are really nothing of the sort. Even the apparently objective process of recording a rat's lever pressing behaviour in a Skinner box requires the researcher to make decisions that influence the data – for example, how hard the lever must be pressed before a press is registered. And, since the behaviour is generally mechanically recorded, the data will not distinguish between presses from the left or right or front or back paws, or the tail or the nose, even though the behaviours involved in each of these differs considerably (Eysenck & Flanagan, 2002).

Similar issues occur when the behaviour of people is observed and described. Few, if any, people watching me right now would say 'he used alternating extensions of his left and right index and second fingers to bring them into contact with black, square areas in the flat panel of an object which also had a second panel at an oblique angle to the flat panel in the vertical plane, these actions being accompanied synchronously with alterations in the configuration of tiny illuminated areas on the obliquely angled panel...' They would probably say something like, 'he typed on his laptop and read as he typed'. Besides being considerably shorter, this description implies all sorts of things about my intentions and ongoing mental states, even though it appears quite 'objective' on the surface. Some critical psychologists, like Harre & Secord (1972) argue

that even if truly objective descriptions of human behaviour are possible, they are actually meaningless, like the first one above. It is only those that make reference to mental processes that actually mean anything. As a consequence, psychologist descriptions of human behaviour must refer to subjective processes in order to be meaningful.

Does studying mental processes mean studying private experience?

Following the collapse of the behaviourist paradigm, psychologists were increasingly willing to admit mental processes into their explanations of human activity. For example **cognitive psychologists** base their explanations around processes like perception, attention, problem solving and memory. However, they still base their explanations on measures that are primarily behavioural. For example cognitive experiments often make use of reaction time (i.e. the time between the presentation of a stimulus and the participants' selecting an appropriate response by pressing a button) as the DV, so whilst mental processes are given house room in theories, evidence is still generally expected to be overt and behavioural.

However, there is a very real sense in which the descriptions of mental processes put forward by cognitive psychologists fall far short of what we mean by private experience. A humanistic psychologist would argue that what we as psychologists should be interested in is subjective experience. Cognitive models come nowhere near describing this (and don't attempt to). The humanistic conception of private experience is encapsulated in the question, 'what is it like to be you?' William James (1890) referred to the 'stream of consciousness' in his writings. By this he meant the second-by-second awareness we have of our own experiences, sensations and feelings. I can attempt to describe what it is like to be me right now – the sounds impinging on me from the outside world – the radio, the birds outside, my partner talking to me from another room – the visual scene – my computer, the desk-lamp, the piles of books and papers round my desk, the painting of an owl on my wall – my thinking processes – trying to decide which ideas I want to express and the best combination of words to convey them and so on. But it seems clear to me that the most detailed description in the world would never really convey to you what it is actually like. There's too much of it and most of it is gone before I can identify and describe it, even assuming I would be able to put it into words.

Should we try to study private experience?

Does that mean that psychologists should simply avoid private experience and focus only on those things that can be studied with a degree of objectivity. Some would argue yes. For Ayer (1959), access to subjective experience is restricted to those whose experience it is, making it unsuitable for scientific study. Most cognitivists would follow Ayer, on the basis that they want psychology to be done scientifically.

Humanists might agree that a complete understanding of what it is like to be someone else is unattainable but they would probably say that this doesn't mean we shouldn't try. For the humanistic psychologists the principle aim of psychology is understanding others. In a similar way (but for rather different reasons) a group of social psychologists referred to as **social constructionists** would reject the 'objective' approach of cognitive psychology in favour of an attempt to reveal how people understand their world and how this understanding is constructed through transactions that take place in society. Both humanists and social constructionists explicitly reject the scientific approach to psychology. They share an attachment to qualitative methodology in their research as they believe these methods come closer to allowing us to capture others' experiences and views of the world. Both make extensive use of unstructured interviews as their primary data gathering technique. Because social constructionists typically believe that people use language to construct particular accounts of the world, their research (often involving some type of discourse analysis) focuses particularly on how people use language to achieve different goals, whereas humanists more usually focus on what people's language reveals about the way they experience the world.