

2006

# Psychology

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## Recommended Citation

Bufford, Rodger K., "Psychology" (2006). *Faculty Publications - Grad School of Clinical Psychology*. 304.  
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## PSYCHOLOGY

Psychology has been defined in many ways. For much of the twentieth century psychology was defined as the \*science of behaviour. Earlier, and again more recently, psychology has also emphasized internal experiences, such as sensations, perceptions, feelings or emotions, motivations and thoughts. Today, most definitions of psychology include both elements. Thus, we will define psychology as the science of behaviour and mental processes.

Psychology as the science of behaviour is concerned with public and observable events. Behaviour is studied in organisms ranging from planaria to people. As the science of mental processes, psychology is concerned with such private experiences as the emotions of fear, guilt and \*depression, and thoughts. Psychology as a science of mental processes is largely limited to the study of humans. Together, behaviour and mental processes comprise external-objective and internal-subjective frames of reference respectively. They form complementary aspects of functioning that fit together into a whole picture. While focus on mental processes rather than behaviour is more comfortable for Christians who emphasize human freedom, a balanced Christian approach needs to hold these two perspectives in tension.

Psychology is a broad discipline with many distinct sub-fields that have important benefits for contemporary society. Among the areas addressed by psychology are sensation, perception, behavioural neuroscience, learning, consciousness, \*language and thought, memory, human development, intelligence, motivation, social relationships, personality, psychopathology, psychotherapy, stress and health. Most introductory psychology texts address each of these (e.g. see Myers, *Psychology*); a few also explore the psychology of religion.

The psychology of religion is an often neglected domain of psychology. Scientific study cannot shed light on whether God exists or on what is morally right or wrong. However, it can investigate what people believe and whether their behaviour is consistent with their beliefs. It can also investigate the relationship of religious faith and psychosocial functioning. For example, psychological research shows that religious persons are less likely to commit crimes, to abuse substances and probably less likely to commit suicide. Religious persons also

cope more effectively with many kinds of adversity. Religious practices such as prayer are among the most common ways people deal with adversity.

Psychological research is valuable in many ways. For example, cybernetics, the science of human-machine interactions, aids in designing the instruments and controls of modern aircraft for optimal pilot effectiveness. Neuropsychological assessment can sensitively test for the adverse effects of medications or environmental toxins on human functioning, can identify the effects of injury and illness on brain function more finely than even the best imaging techniques, and can aid in planning remedial interventions. Psychotherapy has been shown to help persons suffering from anxiety, depression, or more serious psychological disorders.

Psychological advances, however, can be used both to benefit and to harm. For example, psychological testing helps in the selection and placement of military personnel and missionary candidates. But psychological testing can also be used in the service of discrimination against social and cultural minorities as when a test for police or safety personnel is inadvertently or intentionally biased against applicants from minority groups. Psychological techniques can be used for emotional healing or in coercive 'programming' and brainwashing.

Psychology is a controversial topic among Christians. Some Christians contend that psychology is of the devil while others view psychology as God's good gift. Five factors are central to these controversies: world-views, faith, morality, boundaries and coherence.

*World-views.* Everyone has a world-view that answers questions about what exists, how we know it, how it works, what is morally right or wrong and who we are as persons. World-views are largely formed before we can speak articulately. They profoundly shape our views of ourselves and the world, often in subtle ways. All data are interpreted through world-view lenses and data errors tend to reflect world-view biases. Thus, most disagreements about psychology – or theology – stem from world-view disagreements.

Much of the objection to psychology among Christians revolves around the world-views of prominent psychologists. Sigmund Freud, B. F. Skinner, Carl Rogers and Albert Ellis each rejected Christianity. Doubtless their world-views influenced their approach to

psychology in ways that are troublesome to many Christians.

*Faith.* Surprisingly, psychology and theology converge in sharing faith in the sense that all scientists must have faith that the future will be like the past. All scientific data are history in the sense that it was collected in the past, but scientists are really concerned about predicting or controlling the future. Further, all data is interpreted in the context of the interpreters' world-views. Thus science weds world-views with history and foretelling the future.

Christians also believe that the future will be like the past – but only while this earth remains. The faith of Christians is first in the God of the future. But for many psychologists, God cannot be brought into the laboratory. They trust in science. Science, or perhaps their own capacity to know, is their primary object of faith. From a Christian perspective psychology is overreaching – thus becoming a false God.

*Morality.* Christians generally believe that morality is ordained by God and applies to everyone. In contrast, some psychologists assume that morality is situational, simply a social convention. Christian concerns about psychology have focused mostly on psychopathology and psychotherapy. Some Christians view anxiety and depression as sins and view psychology as offering a counterfeit to evangelism and discipleship. Others view anxiety and depression as non-moral ills; for them counseling is viewed as a God-given tool that can be thoughtfully used by Christians to facilitate human functioning and well-being, but must be used with care.

Several recent studies suggest that counseling or psychotherapy may enhance spiritual well-being and that gains in spiritual well-being occurred whether or not the therapists or clients were Christian. Such results may seem surprising, but if humans function holistically, it seems reasonable that any benefits to human functioning will affect the whole person in favourable ways.

*Boundaries.* Christian theology addresses questions about humans, particularly in relationship to God and secondarily in relationship to fellow humans and the world; psychology is concerned about humans in relationship to themselves, each other and the world around them – including non-human organisms. Each field has distinctive domains, but they converge in their focus on humans. Theological anthropology (or the doctrine of humanity) and the

psychology of human development, human differences, personality, psychopathology and psychotherapy seem to overlap. Just as the differences between biology and chemistry blur in biochemistry, the boundaries between theology and psychology are not clearly delineated. To further complicate matters, theologians and psychologists may at times be addressing the same issues, but from different perspectives.

*Coherence or unity of truth.* All human knowing is imperfect – even our Christian beliefs. Psychology provides data that both support and challenge Christian beliefs. In principle, findings in psychology should be coherent with findings in theology. Logically, both could be wrong – or right. But both theology and psychological science have limitations. As fallen persons in a fallen world, we ‘see through a glass darkly’. Our seeing and knowing is improved when we use all the tools of knowing available to us to focus the light and sharpen our insights (see Prov. 27:17).

Christians believe that the Bible is true and that it should in principle be fully consistent with all true psychological discoveries. Because Christians are diverse, the notion that the Bible is true has a variety of meanings for them. First, the biblical text is believed to be historically accurate, and the discovery of primary documents dating to the first century and earlier provides evidence that the biblical record has survived the centuries with little change. Secondly, the Bible provides a history of the Jewish people. Thirdly, the Bible contains spiritual truth contained in allegory, metaphor and symbol, but should not be taken literally. Fourthly, the Bible is considered to be literally true, and many Christians believe the Bible is inerrant in its original documents. Finally, combining elements of the above notions, and perhaps the best view of the Bible as truth, is the view that the Bible conveys truth through a variety of literary mechanisms, including axioms, history, parables, poetry, principles, proverbs and stories. Interpretation of the Bible requires the use of good hermeneutical principles that take into account the text, its historical and social context, its literary style, its authorship and its intended readership. In many respects this approach to the Bible is much like the way we read our morning newspapers. Interpretations derived from the Bible (or theology), then, can be compared with interpreted truth derived from psychological

science and human experience. Comparing theology with theory and experience forms the basis for examining the coherence among these sources of knowing.

Psychology presents challenges to Christians, but Christian beliefs can also bring insights to psychology. For example, recent psychological findings show that those involved in stable marriages find greater sexual fulfilment as well as being generally more contented or happy. This challenges the conviction among some psychologists that the path to human contentment requires greater freedom of sexual expression. Christian beliefs, based on Scripture, can provide a starting place to guide our scientific investigation of human, and non-human, psychological functioning. In practice, of course, our fallen human condition means that our knowing may be flawed in both theological and psychological disciplines and consistencies between the two may not always be apparent. Because of these limitations, discrepancies between the two disciplines should prompt us to review our thinking in both theology and psychology.

### Bibliography

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