

PSYCHOLOGY IN THE REAL WORLD

The goals of psychology

Consider one of the really important health issues of our times – the obesity crisis in Britain. Here's a disturbing statistic to be getting on with: 67% of men and 57% of women in Britain are overweight or clinically obese. Can psychology do anything to help? In the box on the right we use obesity as an example to illustrate what most psychologists seek to do with the research tools and knowledge at their disposal. So what is psychology for?

Describing behaviour

Psychologists want to be able to describe what is happening when people 'behave'. This is mostly a matter of observation. Psychologists observe how behaviours are related to each other. They might, for example, notice that certain behaviours occur together quite often and form a pattern. They might even begin to get an indication of which behaviours are 'normal' and which 'abnormal'. Eventually, after enough studies have been conducted, possible explanations of the behaviour emerge, which takes us on to the next goal of psychology.

Explaining behaviour

Describing behaviour is just a starting point. Psychologists really want to go beyond merely describing the behaviour that is happening and try to *explain* where it comes from, the reasons for it, what causes it. To do this, they formulate theories of behaviour then use the **scientific method** (see page 105) to test them. This of course is where disagreements emerge. There are many competing theories about the causes of behaviour, which often reflect the general **approach** psychologists adopt within psychology. Can psychologists do more than explain behaviour? Yes, they can predict behaviour.

Predicting behaviour

This is the logical next step. Once we are confident that certain behaviours consistently occur under certain conditions, we can use that knowledge to predict how a person's behaviour (including their thoughts) might change in the future. These predictions (known as **hypotheses**) can be turned into statements that can be tested in studies.

Controlling behaviour

The idea that psychology should be in the business of controlling behaviour may have sinister overtones for some people. But what if we changed the language a little? What if we said that the ultimate goal of psychology is to *change* behaviour? This is unquestionably something that many branches of psychology attempt to do. For example, psychological therapies for mental disorders are not just about trying to understand or explain behaviours such as phobias or depression. The intention is to change people's behaviour, from **maladaptive** 'abnormal' behaviour that causes pain and suffering to adaptive, 'normal' behaviours that bring happiness (or less pain, at least).

Apply it

Concepts: Obesity and the goals of psychology

Describing obesity

Researchers use various research methods to work out what obesity is and how it relates to other factors. For example, they may use questionnaires or interviews to learn about attitudes towards eating in obese people. Psychologists might observe people's eating behaviour and measure how much people actually do eat. They might do **brain scans** to see if obese and thin people differ in thinking patterns.

Explaining obesity

The descriptions that are collected enable psychologists to develop explanations. There are several current explanations drawn from the whole range of approaches in psychology. There's a **biological explanation** that explains obesity in terms of the activity of **hormones** and other chemicals within the body. There's a **behavioural explanation** that focuses on past learning experiences of rewards and punishments involving food. There's also a **cognitive explanation** that emphasises the ways that we think about, interpret and perceive the meaning of food and eating.

Predicting obesity

If obesity is associated with inactivity, it is a short step to make the prediction that less active people are more likely to be overweight.

If we identify **depression** as one of the causes of obesity, then again it is a simple matter to predict that depressed people are more likely to be obese.

Controlling obesity

There may even be a political dimension to behavioural control (see 'The Nudge Unit' on the facing page). The obesity crisis is a good example. Because the costs of obesity are so high (especially type 2 diabetes) the government employs psychologists to devise programmes to change eating and exercise behaviours in people who are overweight.

Obesity is reaching epidemic proportions and has been described as a national crisis. There is much that psychology can do to help by using scientific methods to describe, explain, predict and change obesity-related behaviours.

