Psychology as a science
Extra material

Psychological Theories

Psychologist formulate theories to in order to explain psychological phenomena:

- *Summarize, simplify* and *explain* psychological phenomena like memory, emotion and group behaviour
- *Make predictions* about the possible relationships between psychological phenomena and/or variables like learning strategy – test results, emotional state – accuracy of memories and group identity – behaviour
- *Enable application* to real-life issues e.g. educational instructions, therapy to overcome disturbing emotions and group-therapy programmes

Psychological theory is *statement about possible relationships between psychological phenomena or variables*

- Psychological theories are based on certain *assumptions*
- Psychological theories include *concepts*

Psychological theories are

- *principles* and ***not** laws* like theories in physics
- *probable* and ***not** certain* like theories in physics
- always open to some degree of *probability* and *improbability*

Example of A Psychological Theory

Social identity theory aka SIT by Henry Tajfel and John Turner (1979)

- People define themselves by their group membership, and to achieve a positive definition of themselves, people favour their *ingroup* (the group where they belong) in relation to *outgroups* (the groups they do not belong)
  - Individuals exaggerate the virtues of their own group to boost their self-esteem that can lead to *ingroup favouritism*
  - Individuals see the outgroups easily as competitors and possibly even a threat that can lead to *intergroup discrimination*
- SIT in a nutshell: favouring the ingroup in the expense of the outgroup

Example of An Empirical Study in Psychology

Tajfel et al. (1971) – Minimal characteristics groups experiment

- **AIM:** To test the social identity theory (SIT); would schoolboys placed in random groups based on arbitrary task display *ingroup favouritism* and *intergroup discrimination*?
  - *Hypothesis*: Schoolboys placed in random groups based on arbitrary task display *ingroup favouritism* and *intergroup discrimination.* (This was the **precise and testable statement** of this study that predicted what happened to the psychological phenomena under research.)

- **PROCEDURE:** 48 schoolboys were arbitrarily categorized based on their artistic preferences. Participants were shown pictures of modern paintings by Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee. Kandinsky group and Klee group were formed. After random group formation, schoolboys were made to allocate rewards and penalties to other participants.

- **RESULTS:** When schoolboys were required to make an intergroup choice, they favoured their ingroup in relation to the outgroup (more rewards to the ingroup, more penalties for the outgroup). When schoolboys were required to make a choice between two members of the same group, they made decisions to maximize fairness (equal amount of rewards and penalties). *Hypothesis derived from the social identity theory was supported with empirical evidence.*

- **CONCLUSION:** Intergroup discrimination can be created by merely being randomly assigned to a group. When we are aware that an outgroup exists, we will most probably favour our ingroup and discriminate the outgroup like the social identity theory suggests.

Role of concepts, theories and empirical studies in studying psychology

Both the IB Psychology syllabus and the Finnish national upper secondary school psychology syllabus emphasize **conceptual understanding** and the ability to apply given concepts across a variety of contexts. **Theories** with their specific concepts are learned to make sense of phenomena related to human behaviour and applied in various contexts. Students of psychology need to learn *how psychological knowledge is formed* through **empirical studies** and how this knowledge contributes to psychological concepts and theories. In all, learning concepts, theories and empirical studies gives the tools for the student of psychology to critically evaluate psychological phenomena and psychological literacy.