Module PS3031

Conceptual Issues and Theoretical Perspectives

AMMENDED FOR 2014-2105
AMENDED TIMETABLE

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(No lecture or workshop on Week 6; Psychology and society topics are integrated into lectures 3-5)

Aims and Objectives:

This module aims to develop an advanced understanding of the historical and philosophical background to current debates in psychology. Emphasis will be placed on the development of the skill of critical evaluation of alternative models and levels of explanations of behaviour, with a particular focus on current debates and critiques of psychology. Overall, the purpose of the module is to involve participants in discussion and debate on the importance and relevance of psychological research today.

The British Psychological Society suggests that the syllabus should be structured around a number of key questions:

“What is science, and to what extent does psychology (the science of the mind) exemplify scientific characteristics? To what extent is psychology socially and culturally constructed? Can psychology be politically neutral? Can psychology be morally neutral?

Methods of acquiring knowledge: scientific method versus commonsense; the relationship between facts and values. Critiques of traditional methods in psychology; the significance of the standpoint from which values are understood.

Paradigms and research programmes: Lessons from the history of psychology: Reductionism, structuralism, functionalism, relativism and, for example, approaches to personality, and the nature of consciousness.
Critical psychology and subjectivity: the critical psychological view of subject and subjectivity. The origins of ethical issues for psychology; moral underpinnings of the theory, research and practice of psychology; psychologists and community members as partners in the construction of ethically responsible practices.”

Assessment:

The Essay for this module will be 2000 words and will address a contemporary issue within the field of psychology negotiated with the lecturer (YOU HAVE BEEN EMAILED INSTRUCTIONS CONCERNING SELECTION OF TOPIC AND WHO TO APPROACH). The submission date is by 5.00pm Sunday 27th October NOW 23:59 Sunday 2nd November – uploaded into MMS. Feedback will be provided online via MMS within a three week period.

My office hours are 11.00-12.00 on Wednesday and 10.00-12.00 on Friday.

Lecture titles (A further reading list will be provided at the second lecture)

Lecture 1. Introduction to the module.

In this session I will outline the aims and objectives of the course and offer you the opportunity to discuss alternative topics. For at least 5000 years humans have questioned what it is to be a person. Chinese emperors scoured the country to bring the most able and most learned to serve in government rather than just sycophants and courtiers – they assessed individuals’ on their aptitudes, attitudes, motivations, and personality. These are some of the questions that we still investigate today in an idiographic and/or nomothetic way.

Lecture 2. What is this thing called science?

You might have thought that this was obvious but the history of science is littered with comment and criticism. This lecture will explore these critiques. Some have argued that novelists and poets have far more to say about the human condition than any psychologist but description is not explanation

Lecture 3. What is psychology? Philosophical perspectives and early scientific origins

Wittgenstein suggested that “Psychology has experimental method but conceptual confusion”. Psychology has been described as a multi paradigmatic science. Are we all asking the same questions or even speaking the same language? Some of the questions that we address in psychology have been around for a very long time. Ebbinghaus, one of the earliest scientific psychologists, claimed that Psychology has a short history, but a long past. To try to understand the origins of Psychology’s “conceptual confusion” we will discuss in this lecture its philosophical roots and its first steps as a science.
Lecture 4. Psychology as science I: Paradigmatic changes in psychological models of the person and society: from Behaviourism to Cognitive science and beyond.

In this lecture we examine the main paradigms and theoretical debates in the history of psychology as a science (e.g., Behaviourism, Gestalt Psychology, Cognitive Psychology) outlining their main principles and assumptions and relating them to the wider historical, social and scientific context in which they emerged.

Lecture 5. Psychology as science II: Current perspectives and debates.
This lecture will examine current approaches and debates in psychological science, such as interdisciplinarity, cross-cultural psychology (“Can there be A psychology when much of our understanding is based on research with WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, Democratic) people?”), critical psychology, embodied cognition, relations between Psychology and Neuroscience, Neuroconstructivism, etc.

All the lectures will examine the development of psychological models and conceptual debates in the wider context of cultural ideas about persons, science, technology and society, and their historical context.

Afternoon Sessions
The afternoon sessions will be given over to student presentations and guided reading on a variety of course relevant topics. The papers to be discussed are as follows:

Readings for week 2 & 3 are from Medical Hypotheses which you can access via the library’s electronic resources link.

Readings for week 2

Readings for week 3
3. Despite their inevitable conflicts - Science, religion and New Age spirituality are essentially compatible and complementary activities. (2006) 67, 433-436
4. The paradox of the modern mass media: Probably the major source of social cohesion in liberal democracies, even though its content is often socially divisive. (2006) 67, 205-208

Readings for week 4 & 5 are from Trends in Cognitive Sciences which you can access via the library’s electronic resources link.

Readings for week 4

Readings for week 5
8. Consciousness: converging insights from connectionist modeling and neuroscience (2005) 9, 8, 397-404
Introductory Reading List:


You might also wish to consider the representation of psychology in popular culture and popular science e.g. Books and/or movies: A Clockwork Orange, One flew over the cuckoo’s nest, Walden II, Inception, Shutter Island, A Beautiful Mind, Shine, etc.,
**Guide for continuous assessment**

The continuous assessment for PS3031 is writing a (maximum 2000 word) review that addresses "what are the conceptual & theoretical perspectives associated with a current 'hot topic' in psychology". Upload your review to MMS in Word format (.doc or .docx) by 23:59 Sun 2nd Nov 2014.

The aims & objectives of the module are outlined in the handbook. The issues and perspectives your essay should consider are given as:

“This module aims to develop an advanced understanding of the historical and philosophical background to current debates in psychology... Emphasis will be placed on the development of the skill of critical evaluation of alternative models and levels of explanations of behaviour, with a particular focus on current debates and critiques of psychology. Overall, the purpose of the module is to involve participants in discussion and debate on the importance and relevance of psychological research today.”

In other words, select a topic and place your chosen topic & paper into its context. What broad approach underlies the area? What are the key findings? Why is it a ‘hot topic’? How has the area progressed in the last ~5 to 10 years? Throughout this, the aim is to critique (i.e., offer an evaluation of) the topic using different perspectives rather than describe only the topic.

You should think of the issues discussed in the lectures (e.g., mind-body, nativism-empiricism, nature-nurture, biological/cultural, brain-mind, behaviouristic vs cognitivist, applied/theoretical clinical/academic, empirically-based vs intuitive, etc.) to determine those that apply to your chosen topic and think about what issues it may fall short on. Consideration of possible alternative approaches to the topic will help you think of possible ways to critique the topic (remember that a critique should cover both strengths and weaknesses).

The handbook goes on to give more specific examples of issues you might consider:

“What is science, and to what extent does psychology (the science of the mind) exemplify scientific characteristics? To what extent is psychology socially and culturally constructed? Can psychology be politically neutral? Can psychology be morally neutral? Methods of acquiring knowledge: scientific method versus commonsense; the relationship between facts and values. Critiques of traditional methods in psychology; the significance of the standpoint from which values are understood.

Paradigms and research programmes: Lessons from the history of psychology: Reductionism, structuralism, functionalism, relativism and, for example, approaches to personality, and the nature of consciousness.

Critical psychology and subjectivity: the critical psychological view of subject and subjectivity. The origins of ethical issues for psychology; moral underpinnings of the theory, research and practice of psychology; psychologists and community members as partners in the construction of ethically responsible practices.”

If you, for example write about a clinical topic, say a critical evaluation of theoretical approaches to depression or any other psychological disorder, an essay could be structured as follows: First you have to give a short overview over the aim of the essay and the relevance of the topic/paper chosen, then describe in sufficient detail the clinical disorder you are writing about. After that, describe different (major) theories and approaches that have tried to explain the disorder (e.g., biological, neuropsychological, genetic, behavioural, humanistic, psychoanalytic, cognitive; here you will draw on the contents of the lectures), what you see as their strengths and shortcomings (this is the
critical evaluation). In a final section, you can try to integrate the different approaches, and highlight future direction of research.

What NOT to do

This is not a review aimed at providing insight into “the current state of knowledge” of your chosen topic & area (this is the aim of the PS4040 Review Essay). Submitting a purely ‘fact laden’ review will not do as well as a review that critiques the main conceptual issues and theoretical perspectives associated with the field, using carefully selected ‘facts’ from the literature to highlight those conceptual issues.

Selecting a ‘hot topic’

To find a ‘hot topic’, look at current, non-specialist articles. Paul provides links to the American based Psychology Today; The PsychWatch Newsletter; Forensic news links (US); News articles from the American Psychological Association; Science stories can be found at The Observer; the Annals of Improbable Research; Channel 4’s science links; The BBC’s science links. Current Science news from The Guardian.

These ‘hot topic’ identifiers will be based on very recent studies: use these to track down the key papers on which they are based (i.e. their origins ~5-10 years ago and how it has moved forwards).

Grading Criteria: how will we mark your effort?

The assessment aims to evaluate your understanding of how the bigger picture issues discussed at the lectures and afternoon seminars relate to a specific instance of recent research chosen by you.

The first thing you need to know is that you are expected to accomplish this only to the level that it is reasonable to expect at this early stage in your degree. Markers are well aware that you are just at the beginning of your JH year and still learning about psychology in greater depth. However, with your current level of knowledge you can begin to think about a topic in its wider theoretical, conceptual and methodological context. This is the start to you developing a crucial set of skills that will be applicable both within and beyond psychology.

The idea is that your essay uses a key paper of your own choice about a particular topic: you can then address what happened in the lead-up to your chosen key paper, what has happened since then and where could the topic go in the future, trying to situate the paper and its area of research in relation to the big methodological and theoretical issues discussed in the lectures.

Markers will use the following questions to assess your work:

1. Is the importance of the selected research article well described and explained?
2. Is the historical and conceptual context (empirical and theoretical antecedents) in which the selected research article was produced well described?
3. Has the impact of the selected article been discussed and well explained?
4. How well has the evidence supporting your evaluation and conclusions been presented?

To help you think about the issues, here are some pointers. While some will be relevant, some will not: avoid the temptation to try and force each of the following into your essay. That being said, you should try to get a good balance between at least some of the following:
1. Give a short overview over the topic of the essay, its relevance and the key paper(s) you have chosen.
   a. What makes the topic ‘hot’? What impact does the area have (e.g. explaining current events; of medical importance; of relevance to long standing debates...)
   b. Make sure to explain why the paper(s) is key, if relevant giving a brief description of the evidence that demonstrates its importance.
2. Describe the historical antecedents: this could be done by choosing two or three questions to address. There are a great number of possibilities here. Concentrate on those few that are the most straightforward. The types of question could include (but not restricted to)
   a. How did the behaviourists/psychoanalysts/behaviourists view the topic?
   b. What changes occurred following the cognitive revolution in relation to this topic?
   c. In what way do the neuropsychological, humanistic, or other alternative approaches to the issue shed light or provide alternative views on the topic?
   d. …
3. The main part of the essay will concern the reporting of related studies from the key paper to the present. Select the studies you include carefully so there is a flow and development of your position. What are the issues with the science? Remember that all the points you make should be based on evidence.
   a. Does a paper use a Kuhnian stance and gloss over issues? Do the authors over-do the Popperian view and dismiss ideas too readily? [You don’t need to mention Kuhn or Popper: it is using the conceptual issues to help direct your criticism]
   b. Balance: What are the most relevant pros & cons? What is the overall picture?
4. Any topic or area tends to use some methodologies more so than others. As every method has its advantages and disadvantages, this implies that each area will in some way be (marginally) limited in its ability to deal with certain issues.
   a. What aspects have been covered?
   b. What aspects have not been covered?
5. Where should the research head and what are the major obstacles ahead?
   a. What sorts of impact is future research likely to have? [keep this grounded]
   b. What conceptual/theoretical/methodological issues might need to be overcome first?