WHAT IS PSYCHOLOGY?

Imagine yourself in the following situations:

Situation 1. You are a manager, giving your salespeople performance reviews. Your star performer has missed the annual sales quota. Last year this same person sold double the amount sold this year.

Situation 2. You are a parent. If your fifteen-year-old is ever home and actually talks to you, you receive only curt answers: "Yes", "No", "Fine", "I don't know".

Situation 3. You are at the cinema. In the movie, a detective is trying to solve a crime, while simultaneously dealing with a messy divorce.

In every case, you were looking at what someone did, asking why, and trying to predict what would happen next. Why did your sales rep fall short of the quota, and will it happen again next year? Why is your teenager so difficult, and is there anything you should know about it? Why did the criminals commit the crime, and how are the police going to catch them? Why is the detective's marriage failing, and can it be saved?

You may be surprised to learn that you have just been practising psychology.

Everyone's a psychologist

All of us are interested in what other people think and do. We watch the behaviour of real people through our family, friends, and work colleagues (the people around us every day), and in the news (other people in the world). We examine the behaviour of fictional characters in literature, TV shows, theatre, and movies. We want to know what happens next - so we stay tuned, ask questions, turn the page, buy the ticket to the sequel.

But we are not only interested in what people do for its own sake. We sometimes want to influence what happens. Should you discipline your subordinate's poor performance, try motivational techniques, or wait and see what happens? Should you try to talk with your teenager, introduce a curfew, or take no action? From settling an argument over what movie to rent to negotiating a raise with your boss, we often try to make some impact on what other people do.

In this way, we are all psychologists, looking at each other constantly, wanting to know what other people do, why they do it, trying to influence them, and predict what they will do next.

So if everybody practises psychology all day long, we must all be pretty skilled at it. Isn't it just obvious?

He looks like a nice guy

No, it's not obvious. If psychology was so simple and easy, relationships would not fail, people would never misunderstand each other, the police would have a much easier time catching the bad guys, we could always accurately guess the outcome of any book or film.

Psychology is a science. All science tries to understand and predict. Predictions are based on an understanding of what can be observed. For example, if you understand chemical reactions, and you put two chemicals together, you can reliably predict what will happen. A chemist knows that certain variables affect the outcome, such as air pressure, volume, and temperature. Taking these into account, the outcome is certain.

In the same way, if you understand psychology, and you see a person in a certain situation, you can make predictions about what they will do. A psychologist knows that certain variables will affect this outcome, such as life history, motivation, and the immediate surroundings. Taking these into account, we can say what is likely to happen. But we can't always be completely sure.

What psychology is and is not

Psychology is an inexact science. People are complex, and they operate within a complex environment. The variables affecting behaviour can be difficult to identify, and difficult to measure. There are often no right and wrong answers. This makes some people distrust, or even fear psychology.

But the fear usually comes from a misconception of what psychology actually is. Some believe that the words "psychology" and "psychic" mean the same thing. Psychology is not mind reading, palmistry, spoon bending, or magical tricks. Neither is psychology "brainwashing" or "manipulation".

Official definitions agree on what psychology is. The British Psychological Society says psychology is "the systematic study of mind and behaviour." The American Psychological Association defines psychology as "the study of the mind and behavior." Wikipedia calls it "the study of behaviour, mind and thought."

If everybody is already practising psychology, why do we need psychologists? Because psychologists have been trained in the scientific method in order to understand and conduct psychological research. They have specialist knowledge about how people think and behave. And they can teach us how to use that information in helpful ways.

Psychology in society: here to help

Not only do you use it informally every day, but you can see psychology in action everywhere around you. Companies use it to test you when you go for a job interview. Designers apply it to clothing, furniture, telephones, and any number of products so that they will be more easy to use. Advertising companies employ it to sell products.

Trainers use it to help people learn more effectively. A good manager uses it to form project teams that work well together.

To use a computer, you don't have to study computer programming. To drive a car, you don't have to be a mechanical engineer. However, if you know something about how computer software works, it will make using computers much easier. Understanding the mechanics of a car can help you fix and even prevent small problems yourself.

In the same way, to use psychology, you don't have to study to be psychologist. But a knowledge of some of the basic principles of psychology will help you to deal with people and communicate more effectively.

Some related links (copy-paste into your browser):

The science of the mind
http://www.bbc.co.uk/science/humanbody/mind/articles/psychology/what_is_psychology.shtml

Psychology matters
http://psychologymatters.apa.org/

History of psychology
http://webspace.ship.edu/cgboer/historyofpsych.html

Next month, we will be discussing the psychology of organisations.