School psychology

One of the human service fields of psychology whose aim is to help students, teachers, parents, and others understand each other.

Developed in 1896 at the University of Pennsylvania in a clinic that studied and treated children considered morally or mentally defective, the field of school psychology today includes 30,000 psychologists, most of whom work in educational systems throughout the United States.

School psychologists, in various roles within the school systems they serve, focus on the development and adjustment of the child in his or her school setting. School psychologists minimally are required to have completed two years of training after earning a bachelor’s degree; those who have earned their Ph.Ds. may hold administrative or supervisory positions and are often involved in training teachers and psychologists. School psychologists play a key role in the development of school policies and procedures.

School psychologists administer and interpret tests and assist teachers with classroom-related problems and learning difficulties. School psychologists play a key role in addressing behavior issues in the classroom, and in working with parents and teachers to develop strategies to deal with behavior problems.

In some cases, the school psychologist provides teachers and parents with information about students’ progress and potential, while advising them how to help students increase their achievement. They also promote communication between parents, teachers, administrators, and other psychologists in the school system.

See also National Association of School Psychologists.

Scientific method

An approach to research that relies on observation and data collection, hypothesis testing, and the falsifiability of ideas.

The scientific method involves a wide array of approaches and is better seen as an overall perspective rather than a single, specific method. The scientific method that has been adopted was initially based on the concept of positivism, which involved the search for general descriptive laws that could be used to predict natural phenomena. Once predictions were possible, scientists could attempt to control the occurrence of those phenomena. Subsequently, scientists developed underlying explanations and theories. In the case of psychology, the goal would be to describe, to predict, then to control behavior, with knowledge based on underlying theory.

Although the positivist approach to science has undergone change and scientists are continually redefining the philosophy of science, the premises on which it was based continue to be the mainstream of current research. One of the prime requisites of a scientific approach is falsifiability; that is, a theory is seen as scientific if it makes predictions that can be demonstrated as true or false. Another critical element of the scientific method is that it relies on empiricism, that is, observation and data collection.

Research often involves the hypothetico-inductive method. The scientist starts with a hypothesis based on observation, insight, or theory. A hypothesis is a tentative statement of belief based on the expert judgment of the researcher. This hypothesis must be subject to falsification; that is, the research needs to be set up in such a way that the scientist is able to conclude logically either that the hypothesis is correct or incorrect. In many cases, a research project may allow the scientist to accept or reject a hypothesis and will lead to more research questions.

Psychologists employ a diversity of scientific approaches. These include controlled experiments that allow the researcher to determine cause and effect relationships; correlation methods that reveal predictable relations among variables; case studies involving in-depth study of single individuals; archival approaches that make novel use of records, documents, and other existing information; and surveys and questionnaires about opinions and attitudes.

Because the scientific method deals with the approach to research rather than the content of the research, disciplines are not regarded as scientific because of their content, but rather because of their reliance on data and observation, hypothesis testing, and the falsifiability of their ideas. Thus, scientific research legitimately includes the study of attitudes, intelligence, and other complicated human behaviors. Although the tools that psychologists use to measure human behavior may not lead to the same degree of precision as those in some other sciences, it is not the precision that determines the
scientific status of a discipline, but rather the means by which ideas are generated and tested.

See also Research method.

Security objects

A soft, clingable object that provides the child with security and comfort in mildly or moderately fearful situations.

Security objects are items, usually soft and easily held or carried, that offer a young child comfort. Security objects are also referred to as attachment objects, inanimate attachment agents, nonsocial attachments, comfort habits, transitional objects, not-me possessions, substitute objects, cuddlies, treasured possessions, soothers, pacifiers, special soft objects, Linus phenomenon, and security blankets.

Early history

In the 1940s, attachment to a special object was regarded as a childhood fetish reflecting pathology in the relationship between the mother and her child (Wulff, 1946). D. W. Winnicott (1953), however, regarded the object as necessary for normal development: it was a “transitional” experience, intermediate between the infant’s ability to distinguish the inner subjective world from outside reality. John Bowlby considered transitional objects to be a “substitute” for the absent mother, and he deemed the child’s attachment to them normal and even desirable.

Nevertheless, throughout the 1970s, but progressively less in the 1980s and 1990s, a stigma remained attached to children who hugged a blanket in times of stress. The popular—but now generally discredited—stereotype was that these children, being overly anxious and insecure, were better off without their blanket. As a result, the blanket was often taken away from the child, sometimes forcibly, just when it could have been beneficial. Although some disagreement and inconsistency persist in the research literature, there is no justification for such drastic actions. Evidence does not support ascribing psychopathology to children just because they demonstrate an attachment to a security object. Blanket-attached children appear to be neither more nor less maladjusted or insecure than other children.

Theoretical underpinnings

Three current theories pertain to nonsocial attachment. Psychoanalytic theory surmises that it is created as a necessary transition between the child’s outside and inside worlds once the child has formed a sufficient relationship with the mother. It helps augment feelings of personal control and continuity of the self. Ethological theory argues that the comfort object substitutes for the mother and should form only if attachment to the mother is secure. Social learning theory states that the physical characteristics of the object (softness, warmth, fuzziness, etc.) can be rewarding per se. Furthermore, if the mother’s nurturing and distress-reducing presence is associated with the inanimate object, attachment behaviors toward the object may ensue. Because the child is able to control a security object more readily than the mother, attachment to it should begin to develop relatively independently of the mother.

It is not, however, clear from any of these theories why some children engage in comfort habits while others do not. Child-rearing practices are frequently cited as contributing factors, especially children’s sleeping arrangements and parental behavior at bedtime, but evidence has largely been inconclusive. Cultural and socioeconomic factors have received stronger support, although, again, the exact mechanisms underlying the differential acquisition of nonsocial attachments remain unclear. A mother’s sensitivity to her children’s security needs may be relevant, but the quality of the mother-child relationship seems not to be. However, preliminary evidence suggests that the security of a child’s attachment to the mother does predict how a security object will be used in novel situations.

One problem in evaluating attachments to objects is the lack of uniformity in definitions and criteria. Divergent theoretical positions as well as cultural backgrounds have brought forth a variety of interpretations. Another complication involves the unreliability of adults’ recollections about former treasured possessions. In studies attempting to link older children’s or adults’ current behaviors with their previous relationships to a special object, they—or their parents—are requested to recall details. However, such retrospective reports may misrepresent actual events. When college students and their mothers were questioned, 24% of the pairs disagreed totally about whether there had been a childhood attachment, and an additional 19% disagreed on what the object was (Mahalski, 1982). In a follow-up study one year later, 18% of the students contradicted their earlier statements about having had a security object! Clearly, mothers’ concurrent reports and investigators’ direct observations are necessary to generate reliable information about security objects.

Cultural issues

Despite current theoretical assertions that attachment to transitional objects is normal and almost univer-