Capitolo 1 >> INTRODUZIONE

TEMI E PROBLEMI PER LA DISCUSSIONE IN AULA

As an introduction to the science of psychology, one purpose of Chapter 1 is to encourage students' thinking about the scientific method and the need for critical evaluation of research findings. The following questions may be useful for class discussion regarding students' experiences with psychological research and ways of gaining knowledge.

1. **Science in the Public Interest: Violence in the Media**

   The first section of Chapter 1 illustrates how research in psychology impacts society and reviews findings regarding media violence. Students are likely familiar with the major findings, but it may be helpful to review the list of findings (p. 2). Discussion may address students' experiences of violence in the media and their impression of whether they are adversely affected by media violence. Next, describe students' personal experiences as anecdotal evidence (perhaps even a "case study") that lacks any comparison or control condition. That is, students might consider how their attitudes and behaviors might be different *without* exposure to media violence to highlight the importance of comparison. Students also may consider the impact of these research findings on their own future behavior (e.g., additional exposure to violence) and whether society should do more to limit media violence.

2. **The Scientific Method: Ways of Knowing**

   Very early in the course (in the first or second class session) we have found it useful to have a class discussion to help students put the scientific method in context as a way of knowing. We center the discussion on the question, "What is truth and how do we know it?" The discussion can be done most efficiently with students responding individually in a large group but students can also work in pairs or in small groups prior to discussing in a large group. The entire discussion can be completed in as little as 10 or 15 minutes if it is done as one large discussion group. Steps for leading the discussion follow.

   Step 1. To begin the discussion students are asked to respond to variations of a question such as "How do you know something is true?" and "What institutions in our society claim to tell us things that are true?" Students typically respond that they know what is true based on personal opinion, public opinion, or what they have been taught is true. Students identify several societal institutions that claim to tell us things that are true. The institutions typically include education, government, the legal system, religion, and the media. The students frequently generate science as one of the institutions; when they do not, we either prompt students to elicit science as a response or simply add science to the list.

   Step 2. In the second phase, one of the institutions from the list is selected. We have found that the legal system works especially well for this phase. The students are to identify for the selected institution (1) an assumption made in seeking truth; (2) rules or guidelines in seeking evidence for truth; and (3) a decision rule for claiming truth. For the legal system, students relatively quickly identify the three characteristics. The assumption they describe is that the accused is presumed innocent. They describe guidelines for seeking evidence such as search warrants and rules for presenting evidence in court. Finally, they identify the decision rule used in criminal cases of "guilty beyond a reasonable doubt."

   Step 3. The discussion can conclude by noting that science, like the legal system and other societal institutions, is guided by assumptions, rules of evidence, and decision rules. The research methods course provides an introduction to the scientific method. We encourage students to begin their research methods course with the idea that the scientific method is one of many ways of knowing truth.

3. **Students' Experiences as Research Participants**

   Many students experienced being research participants when they enrolled in introductory psychology. Colleges and universities commonly ask introductory psychology students to be part of a "participant pool" and volunteer for various research projects conducted by faculty and students at the institution. Students can be asked to share their experiences as research participants. What did they learn about psychological research through their participation? What did it feel like to be a "subject" of a study? How were they treated by researchers?

4. **Reports of Psychological Research in the Popular Press**

An assignment that can be given to students early in the course is to collect reports of research findings related to psychology that appear in news media, periodicals, and online. (This can be built into the regular course assignments or presented as extra credit.) Not only does this assignment serve to demonstrate the relevance of their research methods course to understanding and discussing topics of practical interest (e.g., parenting, psychotherapy, Alzheimer's disease, learning difficulties), but also provides examples of what psychologists have learned using the scientific method. Because articles obtained by students will vary in their degree of detail, scientific foundation, and other important characteristics, many of these research reports may be used to illustrate the problems of learning exactly what was done from a brief, media report of research. That is, students may be guided to see the difficulty of sorting out the scientific facts in media reports and this hopefully will begin to instill in them a healthy skepticism for what they hear or read in the media.

Students might be asked to consider the following questions:

A. What reasons would you give to another person as to why he or she shouldn't accept uncritically the results of psychological research as it is reported in the news media (e.g., television, magazines)?

Students may argue that they don't have enough information to accept the results uncritically, or that they need to learn what other scientists have learned. They also may state that reporters may have selected information from a report so as to provide support for points they wish to make in their story, or may be biased to present a certain viewpoint.

B. Are there aspects of the media report that make you skeptical about accepting the findings? What type of information could have been provided that would make you less skeptical?

Students may report that they've been skeptical when a report of a finding seemed "too good to be true." In addition, they may wonder whether those reporting the finding have anything to gain through their report (e.g., advertising dollars). Students may suggest that more information would help reduce their skepticism, for example, by reading original research reports and searching psychological literature for evidence that a finding has been replicated.

5. **Ethnocentrism in Psychological Concepts**

The important issue of ethnocentrism can be discussed by selecting major psychological concepts and asking students to consider how these concepts might be viewed differently across different cultures and over time. (It is important to emphasize to students that culture measures more than national identity.) Possible examples for discussion include personal space, achievement motivation, intelligence, introversion.
   Students may also be asked to consider to what extent (1) their own research interests and hypotheses about behavior are influenced by their social-cultural background and (2) topics of interest in contemporary psychology are influenced by social-cultural factors. The following questions may guide discussion:

A. What research topics in psychology interest you? What are some questions you have about behavior and mental processes? To get started, fill in the blank to this statement: I have often wondered why _____.

B. What hypothesis can you form about your topic?

In this exercise, students should be able to develop ideas for the relationships among variables that interest them, as well as possible causes of psychological phenomena. In order to anticipate material in subsequent chapters, students could be asked to differentiate descriptive information from predictive relationships and potential causal explanations in their hypotheses.

C. Consider the ways your cultural background influences your choice of topic and the hypothesis you have developed. How might your topic or hypothesis differ if viewed from a different cultural lens?

In order to brainstorm about cultural influences, prompt students to consider whether people with different backgrounds than themselves would view their topic similarly. For example, male students may be asked to consider how females would approach the topic (and vice versa); similarly, traditional college-age students could discuss whether older individuals might have a different perspective. Finally, students could be prompted to consider other variables (e.g., racial/ethnic background, religion, socioeconomic status) as different lens that influence how we perceive psychological phenomena.

D. What research topics and theories are currently popular among psychologists? You may want to page through some psychology journals or interview some of your psychology instructors.

One answer to this question might focus on recent emphases on neuropsychology. Discussion may focus on theories that explain behavior and mental processes using neurochemical and neuroanatomical processes. A different perspective might emphasize sociobiological explanations, which focus on the evolutionary advantage of certain behaviors and mental processes.

E. How might our current social and cultural context be related to the prominence of these research topics?

The popularity of neuropsychology parallels the technological advances we've seen in our society. Because of recent advances in neuroimaging (e.g., functional magnetic resonance imaging), we are able to identify brain structures that appear to be related to certain behaviors.

F. To what extent does ethnocentrism play a role in the prominence of these research topics?

To the extent that our culture values technology, we may be biased to view research that is neuropsychological as more important or that it contributes more to our understanding of human behavior and mental processes than other approaches.

6. Clinical Psychology and Science

Box 1.3 (p. 14) highlights a recent critique of clinical psychology in which the practice of clinical psychology is compared to pre-scientific medical practice of the late 1800s and early 1900s. The authors of the critique (Baker, McFall, & Shoham, 2009) argue that most clinical psychologists are unaware of scientific evidence that favors the use of empirically supported treatments (ESTs) and moreover, lack the training that would allow them to understand the research methodology and findings. They conclude their critique of clinical psychology by suggesting that training in clinical psychology should be completely reformed to be more scientific and research-based, and that the practice of nonscientific clinical psychology should be stigmatized.

Students often pursue psychology because of their interest in clinical practice and some may do so because they perceive clinical psychology to be more "people-oriented" and concerned with "talking to people about their problems." Indeed, many students regard their research methods course as an obstacle to overcome, rather than a critical aspect of the practice of psychology. Class discussion may focus on these questions:

A. What do you imagine the practice of clinical psychology to be like? Does it include science and research?

B. If you were to seek treatment from a clinical psychologist, would you be interested in a treatment that has been shown to be effective in clinical research, or would you be satisfied with the psychologist's personal experience in treating people? Is your answer different than what you might seek from a medical doctor for a physical problem?

C. If you are considering graduate studies in clinical psychology, what do you think of the argument that training should be scientifically based and that nonscientific training and practice should be stigmatized? Would a strong research focus in clinical psychology training programs affect your choice for study? Why or why not?