

PRACTICAL PSYCHOLOGY

Human Nature in Everyday Life

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TO MY COLLEAGUE
F. R. R.

PREFACE

The great majority of students who spend one quarter or one semester in a general course in psychology do no further work in this field. And many of them have no reason to go forward to expertness in such related fields of science as might revive the accomplishments of their brief experience in psychology. The short course in psychology can be made profitable only if the peculiar needs of such a course be squarely faced. Under these circumstances there should be a strong effort to integrate psychology with the issues of the work-a-day world. This does not require the teaching of the technical applications of psychology. It does, however, require the teaching of a *practical* psychology. Such a practical psychology is one in which scientific principles are given more emphasis than technical devices. But, more than this, it is a psychology in which these principles are selected and treated in such a way as to bring out their intimate relations to the personal and social life of the student. The present book is an attempt at such a psychology.

The educational background presupposed by this text is no greater than is likely to be possessed by a student in the latter part of the high school course. I believe that, with the use of such supplementary readings as are suggested at the end of each chapter, the book will also be fitted for college classes. It should be especially appropriate for students who are going almost immediately into the study of education, business, law, and other professional subjects. In trying to administer to such needs as these I hope that

I have done something which the general reader will find interesting.

In the writing of the book I have had much friendly assistance. From the inception of the project Florence Richardson Robinson has helped me on every type of problem that authorship involves. Professor Leon C. Marshall was one of those who first encouraged the plan of writing such a book as this. His criticisms of the manuscript have been invaluable. All, or nearly all, of the chapters have been read and commented upon by Professor Harvey Carr, Professor Leverett S. Lyon, Professor Francis M. Maxfield, Mr. Henry Reed Burch, and Mr. John A. Powell. Each from his own point of view has made many important suggestions.

Authors and publishers have been kind in permitting the use of illustrations and quotations. I have given specific credit for each of these favors at that place in the text where the material concerned is used.

E. S. R.

Chicago

July, 1926.

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PART I

A PREPARATION FOR PSYCHOLOGY

PRACTICAL PSYCHOLOGY

CHAPTER I

THE SCIENCE OF PSYCHOLOGY

- A. THE SUBJECT MATTER OF PSYCHOLOGY
 - B. THE METHODS OF PSYCHOLOGY
 - C. THE USES OF PSYCHOLOGY
-

QUESTIONS TO KEEP IN MIND WHILE READING THIS CHAPTER

- 1. What is psychology?
 - 2. Why study psychology?
-

A. THE SUBJECT MATTER OF PSYCHOLOGY

Psychology is a study of human nature. — Psychology is a study of the ways of man — of how he sees and hears, of how he feels and thinks, of how he moves. In other words, this science is concerned with *human nature*.

At one time psychology had to do almost exclusively with the conscious experiences. But in late years it has been increasingly realized that what people do is quite as important as what they feel and what they think. And so psychology has come to have a great deal to say about action. Thus, human nature as it is looked upon by modern psychology embraces both mental life and behavior.

Everyone knows something about human nature. — Most people, when they begin the study of scientific psychology, are surprised at the number of facts and principles of mental

life and behavior which they have previously picked up without any effort to do so. Plainly, the reason for this is that human nature is always with them, either in themselves or in those about them. They see every day how practice increases skill and how skill is destroyed by anger and extreme fatigue. They know how people develop from helpless infants into adults competent to make their own ways in the world. Such matters pertain to human nature, and the fact that people generally are aware of them means that most individuals know some psychology, whether they have ever realized it or not.

But there are at least two important differences between scientific psychology and the psychology that one picks up incidentally. In the first place, the knowledge of human nature which is acquired without effort and serious study is very incomplete. Anyone can tell us that "practice makes perfect," but only one who has paid close attention to the question can begin to describe the many reasons why practice brings better results at one time than at another. In the second place, the psychology that is casually acquired contains many errors. There is a strong popular belief that a person can "feel it" if he is stared at, even when his back is turned. Careful students of human nature have submitted this belief to a test and they have found that it is quite false, that it has no basis in actual fact. We often come across the idea that those who are capable of doing well in one kind of study, such as mathematics, are, because of that fact, less likely to be capable in work differing widely from mathematics, such as history. Study of the problem has shown this belief also to be without foundation. A person possessing a good capacity for one type of intellectual work is more likely than not to possess a good capacity for other types of intellectual work. The science of psychology contains not

only more facts, but facts of greater accuracy than are to be found in popular opinions about human nature.

Most of psychology is based upon the normal adult. — The first thinkers who attempted to make a genuine study of human nature confined themselves almost exclusively to the normal adult. This was really quite natural. There is one person whom the student of psychology always has with him and whom he can observe more minutely and exhaustively than he can observe anyone else. This is himself. Furthermore, he is likely to understand best those who are most like himself — other adult human beings.

There are practical reasons why it is well that psychological interest has centered in the mental life and behavior of the mature human being. We need to have a clear idea of the normal adult in order to point the developing child in the right direction; we need to have a clear idea of normal, competent human nature in order to help those who are mentally sick back to a life of health and usefulness.

Nevertheless, psychology would be one-sided if the mental life and behavior of normal adults were its only basis. We must study children, the feeble-minded and the insane, and even animals to gain a broad understanding of human nature.

Child nature is simpler than adult nature. — It is often extremely difficult to study the adult. The emotional life of the mature person is hard to get at because he has learned to hide his emotions to a large degree. No such control is present in the young child, and his emotional life is therefore more open to observation. The adult's action frequently comes after an elaborate process of deliberation which no one but himself can observe. The child's acts are likely to be more impulsive and the ideas and motives governing his behavior are often more evident. When he deliberates, this process is frequently carried out aloud.

In general, then, the nature of the child is so much simpler than that of the adult that it offers easier conditions for study.

There are, nevertheless, genuine difficulties to be encountered in the study of children. We are all prone to forget just how we felt and thought about things during our own childhood. This fact may bring about serious mistakes when we seek to interpret the mental life and behavior of the very young. Difficulties of this sort, though serious, are not insurmountable, and child study has in recent years become an increasingly important part of psychology.

Abnormal conditions exaggerate ordinary facts. — Human nature as it appears in the insane, the feeble-minded, and the intoxicated has a special importance. In such cases there is usually an exaggeration of facts which are difficult to observe in normal individuals. The feeble-minded person is one whose mental development has been held in check by some diseased condition. When such individuals learn to make even the simplest movements, the process is painfully slow. And yet this very slowness may give us an excellent opportunity to study the manner in which habits are formed. It is astonishing how much can be learned about running and batting from slow-motion pictures of those acts. In the feeble-minded it is as though nature were presenting us with a slow picture of mental processes which, in the normal, go on so rapidly as to baffle our closest observation.

The insane or the intoxicated man who thinks that he is Napoleon is revealing in greatly exaggerated form a characteristic which is present in every normal person, but which under most circumstances is difficult to discover. While the normal individual does not actually believe that he is Napoleon or anyone else other than he is, he does have day dreams in which he sees himself in the seats of the mighty. But the

fact that he knows the difference between his dreams and reality makes him a little ashamed of his dreams and unwilling to let anyone else know about them. In the insane and the intoxicated, on the other hand, if the distinction between fancy and reality does not break down, it at least becomes unimportant. Thus, we have these individuals unhesitatingly displaying their fancies.

There is one primary precaution always to be observed in studying abnormal forms of human nature. We must not lose sight of the fact that what we are observing *is* abnormal and *is* exaggerated. The difference between believing one is Napoleon and wishing one were a great man is a difference of fundamental character.

Animal life offers favorable conditions for study. — Behavior and mental life in the child are simpler than in the adult. In the lower animals they are simpler still. For this reason the study of animals is a very profitable part of psychology. Another advantage in studying animals is that they can be used in experiments in which human subjects could not be used. In order to study the rôle of the brain scientists have removed various parts of this organ from rats and monkeys and then observed their behavior. Such experiments have the highest value, but no one would think of performing similar operations upon human beings unless disease or injury made it necessary for a patient's own good. Of course we must be cautious in reasoning from animals to men. We must not overlook the vast differences between animal nature and human nature simply because we are able to discover many points of similarity between them.

B. THE METHODS OF PSYCHOLOGY

Psychology accepts many popular opinions about human nature. — As we have already said, everyone, as a result of

his ordinary experiences, learns some facts and forms some opinions about human nature. Many of these casually acquired facts and opinions are perfectly sound. In this case they can be taken over bodily into the science of psychology. Indeed, a great deal of psychology has been taken over in this way from popular thought and tradition. No scientist discovered that practice improves skill. This principle was discovered in everyday life long before the dawn of science. Thus, one of the most important methods by means of which psychology is enlarged is that of evaluating the knowledge of human nature which is constantly being acquired in the workaday world and including such parts of it as are valid in the subject matter of psychology.

The psychologist observes human nature in everyday life.

— The knowledge of human nature possessed by most of us comes to a large degree from observing people as they go about their ordinary work and play. The psychologist also turns to daily life for many of his observations. But the psychologist does not observe people's everyday actions in quite the same fashion as does the layman. A distinguishing feature of scientific observation is that the scientist, at least in his own field of study, knows what he is looking for and to a certain extent what he is likely to find. If a boy, with little mechanical experience, is told simply to examine a certain automobile engine and learn all about it, he will make little headway. He will be lost in the complications of the machinery, because he does not know what is worth looking at and what is not. But a boy who has been given some wise instruction about gasoline engines, will make all sorts of interesting observations. The psychologist brings to his observations of ordinary behavior certain guiding principles. The fact that everyone can observe human nature does not make everyone a psychologist. A psy-