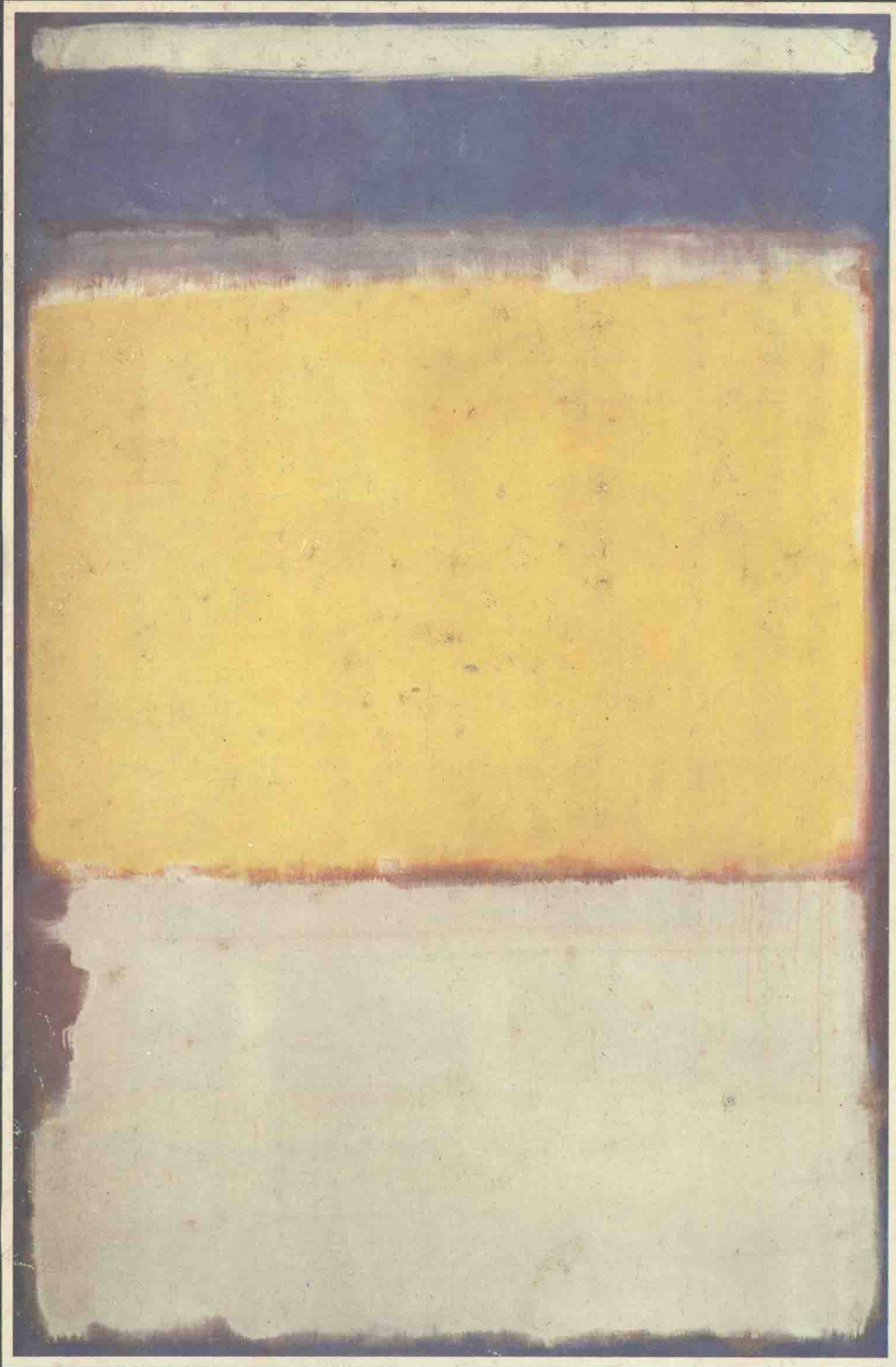


ESSENTIALS OF PSYCHOLOGY



Walter Mischel • Harriet Nerlove Mischel

ESSENTIALS OF PSYCHOLOGY

Walter Mischel • Harriet Nerlove Mischel

Stanford University

Random House  New York

First Edition

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Mischel, Walter.

Essentials of psychology.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Psychology. I. Mischel, Harriet N., joint author. II. Title.

DNLM: 1. Psychology. BF121 M678e

BF121.M578 150 76-54839

ISBN 0-394-31860-9

Manufactured in the United States of America. Composed by Progressive Typographers, York, Pa. Printed and bound by Rand McNally & Co., Taunton, Mass.

Design by James M. Wall

Photo editor: R. Lynn Goldberg

Photo research: Helena Frost

Cover art: Rothko, Mark. *Number 10*. 1950. Oil on canvas 7'6 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 57 $\frac{1}{2}$ ". Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Philip Johnson.

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Preface

Psychology is becoming a science with genuinely important applications for human life. In this book we have tried to capture the essentials both of the science of psychology and of its most exciting applications—we hope without violating either aspect. In this attempt we have searched for fundamental findings and principles, and simultaneously for the most important applications, emerging from the field. We have tried to avoid approaching psychology as a series of distinct specialty areas—physiological, developmental, clinical, social—a catalogue of subfields. Instead, we have looked for common underlying themes emerging from all the diverse activities of psychologists. For example, the two-way interaction between the person and the situation, between qualities of the “subject” and those of the specific tasks or conditions, is as much a concern when a cognitive psychologist tries to understand how the letter “A” is recognized as when a clinical psychologist tries to understand responses to a personality test.

We have searched for the outlines of a coherent discipline—one that, in our view, is beginning to provide a reasonably unified picture of how humans become the complex beings that they are. At the same time, the findings of psychology are generating methods that may enable people to change and, hopefully, to improve their own lives, often with dramatic results. This new yield is not a vague promise of “relevance” for the distant future but an imminent reality, with concrete implications for everyday life now. The fading of the traditionally rigid dichotomy between the basic science and the applied sides of psychology can be seen on many fronts. The study of fundamental questions about the nature of cognition, for example, has simultaneously yielded useful information on how memory may be greatly improved with the aid of mnemonics and other organizational schemes. Similarly, the results of efforts to help people modify their maladaptive behavior have also facilitated a theoretical reanalysis of the possible causes of normal and abnormal functioning. And work on the conditioning of visceral responses illuminates the nature of learning and of the nervous system, while also pointing to techniques that may help people to control their own heart rates and brainwaves. Consistent with such exciting developments, we have tried throughout this book to deal both with basic psychological processes and with their significant human applications.

In our organization we have been especially alert to the growing synthesis between aspects of cognitive psychology and behavioral psychology. We have tried to use this synthesis as a conceptual framework whenever it seemed to fit reasonably and without undue stretching. When important issues seemed especially controversial, we have labeled them as such, providing overviews and critical discussion of the major rival alternatives under the heading “Controversial Issue.” Almost every chapter includes one such Controversial Issue; we hope that together they will help to involve students in the ferment and excitement of the field.

In Part 1 of this book we survey the ways in which information is acquired, rehearsed, and organized, and consider the determinants of performance in contexts that range from the classroom to the bedroom. Part 2 surveys the steps from physical stimuli impinging on the senses to the perceptions, emotions, and states of consciousness that people experience; it deals both with the biological bases and with the psychological processes that interact in this transformation. Part 3 traces the growth, development, and adaptation of the individual throughout the life cycle. In Part 4 the focus shifts from basic processes to a consideration of the person as a whole. The case of a young woman is used throughout this Part to illustrate some of the major findings and issues in the study of individuality. In Part 5 we consider human adjustment and maladjustment in their social contexts and then examine treatments and change programs that deal directly with the relationships between people and their environments, emphasizing the same basic principles introduced in Part 1. Finally, we explore a wide range of interpersonal relationships, surveying the social conditions that influence human interactions and that can be harnessed in efforts to improve the quality of life.

Every teacher knows the continuous conflict between wanting to provide a comprehensive overview and wanting to offer some depth and detail to add flesh to what might otherwise become a mere skeletal outline. We have tried to reduce this conflict by offering an overview of major topics throughout the text, interspersed with “In Focus” sections in each chapter, intended to highlight a point, a finding, or an issue more deeply or vividly.

We have also taken great care to avoid oversimplification while writing at a level appropriate for a wide audience of nonprofessionals. Italics are used consistently throughout the text to identify all special terms: these key terms are defined when they first occur and again in the Glossary at the end of the book. The point-by-point summary at the end of each chapter is exceptionally detailed and intended to distill all the major points made in the book.

We have attempted reasonably comprehensive coverage of the whole field, while recognizing that considerations of time and specific objectives will lead some instructors to rearrange the sequence of chapters or to assign only some parts. The sequence in which the chapters are presented in the text was designed for a comprehensive standard survey of the field. In briefer courses, or when less coverage of physiological psychology and sensation is preferred, portions of Part 2, especially Chapters 5 and 6, may be omitted without loss of continuity. In courses designed with a personal and social focus, a sequence that begins with Part 4 (Individuality: The Person) may provide an especially appropriate alternative.

Chapter 1 gives a sufficient introduction to methodology for comprehension of all data presented in the text. Although we rely extensively on research findings throughout the book,

we consistently avoid quantitative details. In courses that have a strong methodological orientation, inclusion of the material on statistics in the Appendix should be useful.

Many people have helped in the development of this book. Drafts of material on physiological psychology and sensation now included in Chapters 5 and 6 were contributed by Harold Schuckman of Queens College, City University of New York. The following reviewers were especially constructive:

J. Jay Braun	Arizona State University
James F. Calhoun	State University of New York at Stony Brook
Nancy W. Denney	The University of Kansas
Dean Diggins	Brooklyn College of the City University of New York
Morton H. Elfinbein	Southeastern Massachusetts University
Barry R. Haimson	Southeastern Massachusetts University
Kenneth Henry	University of California, Davis
Neal Kroll	University of California, Davis
Mark G. McGee	University of Minnesota
Kenneth B. Melvin	University of Alabama
Leonard L. Rosenbaum	Montgomery College, Rockville, Md.
H. Richard Schiffman	Rutgers University
Lenesa White	Brooklyn College of the City University of New York

Barbara Wolcott provided valuable commentary on all chapters and diligently assisted with the Glossary. Louise Meyers cheerfully typed endless drafts of the manuscript and helped greatly with many specifics. The publisher's staff has done much to facilitate the final transformation from typescript to text. Elaine Rosenberg's contribution was especially impressive; she devoted herself fully to every aspect of the entire production process. Thanks are also due to H. Berggruen, H. Bornstein, and P. Kirkeby for their help with graphics and art, and to Susan Quasebarth for the preparation of the index.

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