

2-1 Studying people

The British Psychological Society defines psychology as:

The scientific study of people, the mind and behaviour.

(British Psychological Society, 2007)

If you are reading this you are probably interested in people and curious about what is going on in other people's minds and you want to understand more about why people behave as they do.

However as you study psychology you will probably find that you will be asking more and more questions rather than finding straightforward answers. The reason for this is that when you study psychology you are studying people, and people are complicated and can be changeable.

Try out the activity below and you'll start to see why trying to give a single simple explanation for human behaviour is almost impossible.

Activity 1: Boys' toys and girls' toys

0 hours 5 minutes

In the photograph below there are two children playing with toys. You will see that the boy is playing with the truck and the girl with the doll. Most children, when given a free choice of toys, tend to select the toys that are thought to be appropriate for their sex. Can you explain why they behave in this way? You can give as many explanations as you want, even some that you don't agree with but think other people might come up with.



Figure 1 Children playing

Discussion

There are lots of possible explanations for this. Have a look at the list below and compare it with yours. It doesn't matter if your responses are different, that only goes to show how complicated explaining behaviour is!

- It is because boys and girls are biologically different. Girls are naturally more motherly and they pick dolls whereas boys are naturally more interested in cars and trucks.
- I think that sometimes boys might want to play with the dolls but they think that because they are a boy they should pick boys' toys.
- It is to do with the way they have been brought up as the adults around them tend to give girls dolls and boys trucks. Also children are often influenced by their friends. Boys will often make fun of other boys who play with dolls.
- It has a lot to do with television and particularly adverts aimed at children. When they are trying to sell dolls, advertisers show girls, not boys, playing with them.

In trying to understand the children's behaviour we have a number of explanations that suggest the reasons for the choice of toys could be related to:

- the child's biological sex
- what they think is the right kind of behaviour for their sex
- their upbringing and the way they are treated by adults and their friends
- wider cultural influences from television and other forms of media.

In the following sections you will be able to have a brief look at a number of different explanations that psychologists use in their attempts to understand people. You'll start with the influence of biology, specifically the brain, on behaviour and then consider how the way people think about their world will affect their behaviour. Next you'll explore the influence of close relationships and finally you'll see how identity is shaped by groups and the wider culture.

End of discussion

