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Research Paper

Disciplinary Distinctions and Pedagogical Considerations of Teaching Psychology in Indian Academia

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ABSTRACT

A student of Psychology often begins their journey with a query of whether Psychology should be defined as a Science or Humanities subject. Besides categorization, or the degree definitions, the question deserves deeper exploration in terms of how to discover the subject, for the novice learner. Would the rigour of research in the physical sciences, and hard-core quantitative analyses be the primary criteria of deciding whether a subject or discipline be defined as a Science? Or would depth of explanation, and more eclectic approaches be amenable to exploring for more knowledge, qualitatively and quantitatively? Linked to this distinction is the approach to teaching and learning the subject at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The listing of Psychology as a subject/ domain of study varies from Science and Technology, to Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences faculties across higher education institutions in India (and abroad). The pedagogy of teaching Psychology appears to vary as well, typically most including theoretical concepts and applications beyond the classroom. The question most interesting perhaps is whether it need be restricted to any specific faculty at all, especially in postgraduate level, but rather engage a more multidisciplinary avenue. The present paper aims to raise these questions for more reflections on teaching-learning practices in Psychology.

Keywords: *Psychology, Discipline, Inter-disciplinary, Multi-disciplinary, Science vs. Non-Science, Pedagogy*

The present-day educational sphere appears to be questioning many of the traditional perspectives on the notion of subjects and disciplines as well as pedagogy. One subject domain which continues to question its own disciplinary position is Psychology.

The present paper intends to explore two facets of a question that is familiar to every student of Psychology, viz., 'Is Psychology a Science?'. There's more to this question than may immediately spring to the mind. One aspect is the traditional notion of what constitutes as a 'Science' discipline, and what does not, and whether Psychology meets any or all of such pre-defined criteria of 'Science'. Another aspect is the institutional categorization of Psychology in its different faculties, be it Sciences, Humanities and Social Sciences, or the

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more collaborative Arts and Sciences, or any other. The former question involves more of a theoretical discourse of the position or location of Psychology as a discipline, while the latter concerns more practical aspects of determining teaching pedagogy and conducting research in Psychology and related domains, within the designated school or faculty.

Whether Psychology, as a discipline of study, can be categorised under the 'Sciences' or whether it fits better in the domain of 'Humanities' is a question that has been long raised. And for a significant period of time, there has been a pressure, almost a compulsion (one could argue), to establish the discipline as a scientific one, with rigorous experimentations, and evidence-based approaches. Yet, as a discipline that is primarily concerned with the study of the human mind and behaviour, the somewhat abstract nature of some of the constructs investigated in the domain, cannot be denied. Consequently, the need for qualitative explorations also cannot be discarded. Also, aspects of personal characteristics from individual differences in variety of case studies often informs the domain of unique human qualities. The present paper traces some of the key concepts of relevance to the study of Psychology of the human mind from stalwart figures of philosophical thinking, moving on to establishment of the trend of scientific investigations in the domain, and further on to the present perspectives on the position of the discipline, with respect to its belongingness to the Science and/or Humanities domains.

The Humanities Roots – Philosophical Foundations

Psychology, as a discipline, like many others, traces its roots to philosophical foundations. Again, there has been investigations into its establishment of an identity for a separate 'science' discipline. Hergenhahn (2009) notes:

> …did Psychology commence when explanations of human cognitive experience, such as those proposed by the early Greeks, became more systematic? Plato and Aristotle, for example, created elaborate theories that attempted to account for such processes as memory, perception, and learning. Is this the point at which Psychology started? Or did Psychology come into existence when it became a separate science in the 19th century? (Hergenhahn, 2009; p.2)

Interestingly, even from Philosophical foundations, two distinct perspectives have been linked to Psychology. "A primary dialectical tension emerged between authors who supported a monistic, method-oriented science and those who supported a dualistic, object-oriented science." (Gaj, 2016, pp. 141). Gaj (2016), in the book titled '*Unity and Fragmentation in Psychology - The Philosophical and Methodological Roots of the Discipline*' further notes that varied elements of 'fragmentation' of Psychology have restricted the domain from taking on a unified comprehensive structure that would reflect well in theorisations as well as practice facets of the discipline. Key concepts interspersed in the construct of fragmentation in Psychology involve the diverse paths in which the discipline has evolved, from unique sources of knowledge which have amalgamated into the domain, and distinct lines of thinking rooted in theoretical bases of knowledge, to variety of contexts where psychological interventions have been deemed necessary (Gaj, 2016).

Till the emergence of Experimental Psychology, with the beginning of empirical investigations intended to establish a stimulus-response paradigm, in the nineteenth century, explorations of Psychology as the study of the human mind, remained primarily in the purview of Philosophers. When attempting to trace the history of Psychology, descriptions of symptoms of mental illness, ranging from melancholia (depression), mania to phobias,

paranoia and hysteria, have been noted as far back as the fifth century BC in the legendary Hippocrates' seminal work, 'The Art of Healing'. Traces to using mathematical principles of Pythagoras to psychological harmony have also been noted as early as the sixth to fifth century BC.

Socrates's (fifth century BC) epistemological approach to the concept of the mind holding hidden truths emphasized that the mind, therefore, must be investigated through questioning. Socratic method of using instructional technique of asking questions to encourage students into self-exploration gained notable prominence. Plato, who was Socrates' student, expanded the teacher's work elaborating on the concept of an 'active psyche' or 'soul', which was purported to be the driving force behind the human thought and action (Katona, 2002). Plato's work drew attention to the concept of sensations and how understanding of forms and reasoning are connected to transitory sensations. The Theory of Forms by Plato addressed the concept of how the human experience of the world may not be entirely authentic representation of the external world. Additionally, Plato's perspective was that appropriate balance of three parts of the soul, viz., appetitive (physiological need based), emotional (feelings and passions) and rational (truth seeking), would be key to the mental well-being of the individual.

Aristotle, who was Plato's student, further expanded the understanding of Psychology, proffering memory principles and their explanations, with regards to similarity, contrast, contiguity, that have stood the test of time, and are studied as key concepts in perception and memory, till date. Aristotle's emphasis was on experience being the basis of all human knowledge. Aristotle's contribution to Psychology further incorporates his modification of the tripartite soul concept of soul. According to Aristotle, the soul has three parts, viz., nutritive part which helps the individual grow and reproduce, appetitive part which uses sensory information, influencing behaviour, and rational soul, which serves as the basis for reasoning and decision making. Aristotle's concepts of the three parts of soul differentiate plants, non-human animals and human beings, in terms of possessing nutritive, nutritive and appetitive, and all three respectively. In addition, Aristotle's three-part soul concepts have later been linked to Freudian concepts of Id, Ego and Superego, after a fashion. Aristotle's work also incorporated causal explorations of various phenomena, his approach notable for its more scientific observational nature of investigations.

While philosophical thinking about Psychology, the study of the human mind, continued in related as well as distinct avenues, through the medieval to the modern periods, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries also bear witness to incredible scientific thinking, inventions and discoveries of the calibre of Galileo Galilei and Isaac Newton. Simultaneously, came a philosophical thinking shift; in this regard, the works of seventeenth century French philosopher Rene Descartes and British political philosopher Thomas Hobbes are especially worth mentioning. Descartes' work is relevant to Psychology in particular with relevance to his assertion on the dualism of the human mind and body being distinct entities and the interaction between the two (Damjanovic et al., 2015). Cartesian dualism's emphasis on physical world events having exclusively physical causes places a contention often with the interactive aspect of the mind and the body.

According to noted British philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, human beings are similar to other animals, in the sense that both are biological machines, driven by passions; mind is nothing more than the product of a mechanical brain. (Meehan & Stiver, 2009). In addition, Hobbes

is also known for his subscription to the 'materialism' viewpoint of exclusive existence of matter, and disposal of all else for explanation of the mind. Hobbes also discarded the notion of free will, emphasizing the mechanical nature of mental processes, lack of awareness of external causes of impulses and actions. Hobbes' position largely found followers among experimental psychologists in later years (Ludden, 2019).

At this juncture, late sixteenth to early seventeenth century English philosopher, and largely lauded as the Father of British Empiricism, Francis Bacon's landmark theorisations of Inductive Reasoning must be mentioned. Bacon's proposed that for genuine understanding of general laws of nature, human reasoning must take a path, reverse of the erstwhile favoured 'deductive reasoning' paradigms. Bacon postulated that judicious reasoning should be focused on the notion of inductive reasoning, where individuals would examine specific cases to extrapolate to general rules (*APA Dictionary of Psychology*, n.d.). Bacon's concepts heavily influenced twentieth century American Psychologists in their scientific investigations.

Seventeenth century British empiricist philosopher John Locke considered human minds to be blank slates at birth. Locke postulated that the understanding of the world comes through association of new experiences with old ones, which is the essence of 'Associationism'. Human mind, although empty of content, at birth, contains innate processes or faculties for organizing information, which are obtained via experiences through senses, and that sensory experiences are the fundamental sources of information for human beings. Locke was a strong proponent of scientific methods being the only reliable source of information and knowledge worth gaining and was a pioneering figure in what is popularly known as the 'thought experiments' which have gained more rigorous scientific investigations in later years (Uzgalis, 2022).

Eighteenth century German philosopher Immanuel Kant's perspectives on human cognition were advanced, even considered 'radical' by some theorists, for its time, and find relevance to the thinking on cognitive systems, till the present times. Kant conceptualises motivation for action in a cognition–feeling–desire model of motivation (Frierson, 2005, 2014). Kant's argument was that human mental states consist of miscellaneous pieces of information when individuals engage in object perception; these pieces are not organized in terms of mere association, but rather linked and arranged by meaning. Therefore, the human mind perceives a meaningful whole, rather than elementary fragments. Thus, perception is truly interpretative, actively involving meaning as the basis of constructing a complete experience, as opposed to a passive accumulation of piecemeal segments (Schultz & Schultz, 2011). Especially the notion of transcendental idealism, in Kant's assertion that human mind has inherent principles which help the individual organize any perceptions they may obtain through their experiences of the world. This concept of innate principles, in particular, among Kant's theorisations about the human mind, was especially influential on Gestalt Psychology in the twentieth century.

George Berkeley, an Irish Philosopher, known for ground breaking work in depth perception in late seventeenth, early eighteenth century, was a proponent of 'Idealism' the philosophical stance, that the mind and the ideas it produces solely cover the world. Berkeley's concept of the world consisting only of things perceived, and the perceiver or agent, the human being, the latter concept further associated with the notion of 'soul'. Berkeley further postulated that the agent's perception may be real or imagination based, or spiritually guided, thus

bringing together otherwise traditionally considered opposing stances of science and religion. Berkeley's conceptualisations have been the subject of much critique in later times (Robinson, 2004), though his fundamental work on depth perception remains well appreciated till date.

Eighteenth century Scottish Philosopher, David Hume subscribed to the associationism perspective of Locke. Hume's Laws of Association describe how simple ideas come together to form complex ideas, and include three key elements of resemblance, contiguity and causation. Hume's viewpoint incorporates the concept of association by causation, where, causal connection is inferred, not perceived. Hume posited that perceived actions are just the actions and any causal connections between the concerned object is inferred by the observer (Morris & Brown, 2022).

Empiricism refers to the theorical notion that all knowledge is based on experience derived from the senses – observable and testable. Stimulated by the rise of experimental science, it developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, expounded by Locke, Berkeley, and Hume. With the escalation of empiricism, came the notable shift of Psychology from its philosophical roots towards its distinction as a separate scientific discipline.

Brief trajectory of the establishment of Psychology as a Science Discipline

One of the most interesting points to note about much of the theoretical concepts discussed till now is that – originally, much of the conceptual understanding of the domain was just that – theoretical – to a certain degree, this could even be termed as speculative. Though some scientific thinking and observation-based records date far back, it was not really until the establishment of experimental psychology laboratories in the latter half of the nineteenth century that formal, scientific, as in empirical investigations of the domain began.

Psychology's shift from the umbrella of Cognitive Science to its own identity as a Science

Much of original theoretical conceptualisations of Psychology may be noted within the larger umbrella of Cognitive Science, typically seen as an interdisciplinary area, comprised of Philosophy, Psychology, Anthropology, Linguistics, Artificial Intelligence, and Neuroscience (Thagard, 2019). While theoretical roots of many key concepts in Psychology could be traced to Philosophical foundations, a gradual shift in seeking empirical evidence in order to support such theorizations began in the modern period with what could be termed as a 'scientific bent' in thinking among the philosophers. From there rose the idea of establishing centres where such investigations could be carried out.

Experimental Investigations

Since the nineteenth century, Psychology began to distinguish itself from the larger umbrella, erstwhile known as Cognitive Science, to relatively narrower concepts, amenable to testing through 'tools of science'. In simple terms, this saw the active efforts of designing and conducting experimental work. Towards this objective, the formal laboratory-based investigation of Psychology, i.e., beginning of Modern Psychology, with a scientific approach, began with first dedicated laboratory, in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Wilhelm Wundt opened the Institute for Experimental Psychology at the University of Leipzig, Germany, in 1879. Systematic, methodological exploration began here. With the increasing emphasis on data or evidence-based research, the focus on obtaining numerical data began to gain prominence, through laboratories being established to execute such work.

Gradually, Experimental Psychology research have taken on more 'scientific' rigour – from sensitivity of measures, i.e., precision of instruments, specificity of research questions, control of confounding (extraneous) variables, and objectivity of the researcher. Notable advancements have been possible in experimental investigations with computerized measures, many software programs routinely being designed and upgraded to increasingly make old relatively imprecise instruments gradually obsolete. Other sophisticated measures, known for their uses in medical domains, such as EEGs, ERPs, FMRIs, etc., have been increasingly incorporated into psychological testing, especially in neuroscience based scientific investigations.

Contemporary Position

Presently, a notable area of the discipline of Psychology appears to be more amenable to accepting evidence from Neuroscience, as seen in increasingly more collaborative work in neuropsychology and related areas. Another intriguing area routinely being explored in psychological research considers human-computer interaction, ranging from human factors designing including machine use and optimization in the professional sectors, typically undertaken in domains of Industrial and Organizational Psychology (Spector, 2012), to the more technical exploration of potential of incorporation of Artificial Intelligence in greater performance output and increased human productivity in future days, the latter often necessitating collaborations between computer science domain specialists and psychologists. Modern Psychology, noted Zimbardo et al., (2012) is:

> … a field in flux. In recent decades, the biological, cognitive, and developmental perspectives have become dominant. And increasingly, adherents of once conflicting perspectives are making connections and joining forces: We now see such new and strange hybrid psychologists as "cognitive behaviorists" or "evolutionary developmentalists." At the same time, nearly all specialties within psychology seem eager to make a connection with neuroscience, which is rapidly becoming one of the pillars of the field (Zimbardo et al., 2012, pp. 20).

Again, what is truly interesting to note is that leanings towards so called pure or natural sciences or technology are not the only trends in interdisciplinary or collaborative work being done in the domain. While experimental Social Psychological research has carved a niche for its own space in the research literature, some Social Psychology and other sub-domain research are being conceptualized and executed from qualitative approaches, often informed by specialists from Humanities and Social Sciences domains, with expertise in Sociology, Anthropology, etc.

There are also increasing amount of work in core Humanities areas of literary and historical texts, that are often re-examining the texts in the light of psychological, especially psychoanalytical and psychodynamic perspectives from Freud, Jung and others. Thus, while purists may continue to question the authenticity of domains with respect to their strict adherence to scientific practices, practitioners in varied domains are consistently engaging in interdisciplinary work to advance comprehensive understanding of the subjects, independently, and as a whole building a large reservoir of human knowledge.

QUESTIONING THE DICHOTOMY AND DUALITY

Yet, even in the twentieth century, whether Psychology, as a discipline, must be restricted to a definition of 'Science' or not, remains relevant. Before going into any further deliberation

on this point, it needs to be noted that the said narrow identity of 'science' may be negligent about certain concerns.

What the 'Science' distinction may be missing

The rigid obedience of scientific approaches to all research work in Psychology may leave some areas unexplored or underexplored. In this context, it would be prudent to note that examination of psychological research questions may only be possible through extensive field study – be it naturalistic observations or in-depth interviews in the natural habitat of the people (common in Anthropology), and not conducive to laboratory settings. In addition, the nature of research analysis must be judiciously decided – not all questions yield responses that can be suitably quantified; in such cases, qualitative approaches, instead of merely relying on numbers or statistical 'significance testing' parameters to establish authenticity of the knowledge (information) gathered, would likely be more appropriate. Over-emphasis on mathematical or statistical evidence may end up as a detrimental rather than beneficial feature of Psychology research. Another elemental consideration, that is sometimes ignored in typical scientific psychological research, is the notion of individual difference, that often may beg Idiographic instead of Nomothetic approach, the former typically amenable to less scientific rigour compared to the latter. While the notion of universality, in terms of standardised measures may be admittedly useful when the intention is to compare people's responses, for focusing on the individual person, an individualised, or customised approach may be necessary. The contention is ever relevant, especially in the context of clinical and related psychotherapeutic or other psychological work where intervention aimed at the individual's well-being is the core objective of the endeavour.

Therefore, comes the question - then why the dichotomy (Science versus Non-Science or Humanities) at all is relevant or worth discussing in the present times. One may ask, why, even today, the domain of Psychology appears to struggle for its identity, in this respect? A rather pragmatic consideration would be relevant here. In other words, a small reality check into how 'Psychology' as an Undergraduate Honours (Major) Course, is categorised and taught, the world over? From various institutions in India and abroad, be it the United Kingdom, United States of America or other seats of prominent or novel works in Psychology, the Undergraduate degree offered may be a Bachelor's in Science or a Bachelor's in Arts. Also, the said degree program could be offered under the School of Arts and Sciences, School of Sciences, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, and so on. If one asks, why this may be a concern? An extremely realistic, pragmatic basis of this concern remains in the forefront of the domain today – the issue of funding. This issue is especially of importance, if anyone wishes to conduct primary data-based research and/or, with clinical populations. The picture of significantly lower funds allocated to Humanities and related domains compared to Science and Technology domains is similar across the world. In the 2018 Bastion article titled 'Money for Nothing: The Disconcerting Future of the Humanities in India', Pant and Dass (2018) note that:

> This focus on science and technology by the government coupled with a severe funding shortage has caused the decline of research in the humanities. From 2006 to 2010, the total grant to ICSSR was only 2.3% of the amount provided to the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) and approximately 11% of the total grant to the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR).

Therefore, from a purely economic perspective, Psychology would benefit by being considered a 'Science' discipline. However, this again brings to the foreground the point of

whether Psychology, in its perpetual quest for being recognized as a 'Science' is censurable for potentially neglecting non-numerical, qualitative nature of data, that could shed light on as-yet less explored aspects of the Psychology.

Psychology, as a discipline, has made much progress, particularly, in terms of more technologically advanced and scientifically complex investigations of the human mind and behaviour. However, the fundamental question as to whether the domain of Psychology will be endlessly mired in this dissension of whether its inclination is towards 'Science' versus 'Humanities', remains an open one.

An acceptable alternative to the contentious position of Psychology leaning towards 'Science' as opposed to 'Humanities' disciplines for its identity, may be to remain a separate one, which amalgamates the essence of both for a more informed and comprehensive education about the subject. Mixed research designs, with elements of both scientific rigour of quantitative approaches, and subjective understanding of qualitative approaches can bring together more cohesive, meaningful understanding and interpretation of the subject, in its entirety.

The Practical Pedagogical Concerns

Behari and Saxena (2017) explored, in great detail, the need and scope of pedagogies in the domain of higher education. The salient question they raised was whether true mastery in learning was possible unless backed by robust pedagogy, the latter albeit being frequently ignored when making and executing educational policies. Perspectives on pedagogy are diverse, of which two unique ones are discussed here, briefly.

Freire's (1972) emphasis on humanistic pedagogy focusing on more application-oriented approach to education and functionality could be the foundational base for modern liberal arts education, including the exploration of Psychology. This would not necessarily ignore empirical or laboratory work, but extend the knowledge gained from the same to real-life problem-solving settings, including the development of the individual learner in higher education to be flexible in their learning, and expand their theoretical knowledge to contemporary issues in the outside (beyond the laboratory) world.

Giroux's (2011) Critical Pedagogy text, on the other hand, emphasizes the significance of the learner's background including home environment, community and culture linked resources. Giroux rejects the premise of traditional classroom teaching focused on knowledge transmission to the exclusion of the societal location of the student, and emphasizes that education must accentuate sensitization to others' suffering for learners to equip them to be critical thinkers who would assume accountability for major ethical and political decisions of contemporary society.

In the context of these conceptualizations of pedagogy and their relevance to teaching of Psychology at University level, one key notion is the social responsibility of future psychologists, especially for those considering career as mental health professionals. As Wise (2005) states, professional duties of mental health workers may often require adequate understanding and practice of ethical and legal guidelines, which in their essence may need a basic sensitivity to the trials and tribulations that are borne by many individuals and communities.

To extend to the practical pedagogical concern to the teaching of Psychology at Undergraduate and Post-graduate levels, the issue may be more along the lines of approach, rather than conceptual origins. This again, is at least partly related to whether the approaches need be more aligned to science and technology disciplines, or whether the approaches may be better aligned to arts and humanities disciplines, or neither. Possibly, the teaching and learning of Psychology could occur, with elements from all, but not restricted to any specific approach, including understanding of rigorous quantitative as well as in-depth qualitative approaches. Class teaching pedagogy, in Indian higher educational institutions (based on personal experience, as well as informal interviews conducted with students and faculty across various higher educational institutions, i.e., HEIs), is often seen to be a mix of traditional lecture, interactive discussions, as well as hands-on practical work, for typical theoretical papers of Psychology from Paradigms of Psychology, Developmental Psychology, Personality to Gender Psychology. Psychology curriculum typically also include research and statistical analysis courses for which hybrid approach involving lectures, demonstrations and practical computations may be accommodated. The research could and perhaps should be conceived at different levels involving participants from different walks of life, and different strata of the socio-economic status, for more comprehensive understanding of psychological phenomenon across state of national borders. At the same time, contextual relevance must be discussed by teachers, learners and researchers in and out of the classroom.

An aspect which is not common in India, but quite common, especially at post-graduate levels i.e., Master's Degree courses and Doctoral Studies (Ph.D.) levels, abroad (based on personal experience, as well as informal interviews conducted with students across various HEIs in the U.S.A.) are advanced seminars – courses which encourage students to do extensive readings of salient publications including journal articles and book chapters in the relevant area, thereafter writing reports and engaging in group discussions on the common readings with other students and teaching faculty, for more comprehensive understanding. This approach of advanced seminars is more common, even abroad, across arts and humanities domains, rather than science and technology domains. In Indian higher educational scene for Psychology, it may be considered.

From Pedagogy to Assessment and Evaluation

The final part of this paper focuses on assessment and evaluation of students' work and learning to award them their degrees. In India, typically, lecture type courses are followed by examinations, including theoretical questions, to which students write answers and the same are evaluated following some rubric. For research methodology and statistics papers in Psychology, the examination may also contain hybrid pattern of questions, including theoretical/ conceptual questions, as well as computational and illustrative questions, where students write and/or calculate their answers, which are thereafter evaluated, as per grading rubric. Students abroad often receive an additional edge with the papers of advanced seminars. Advanced seminars frequently bypass the typical standalone examinations, instead relying on extensive writing assignments throughout the semester, typically followed by one final detailed assignment of full research/ review paper to be submitted at the culmination of the course, which counts for a notable part of the grading in the concerned paper.

The Indian educational system appears to be gradually considering changes, especially in the light of the National Education Policy (NEP), 2020. Yet, within the given constraints of

limited resource and infrastructure, it is imperative to think of alternatives or additional supplementary aspects of teaching and learning different domains, including Psychology.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, it is perhaps time to question the importance of the earlier question regarding science or non-science status of Psychology. Instead, perhaps, the more prudent approach of present-day teaching and learning of Psychology at the higher education level would be to accommodate the real-life necessities and constraints; it would be far more functional towards preparing students of Psychology to become better equipped with clear understanding of working in the real world with all its vagaries, aiming for a long-term goal of better mental health for all.

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