

Operationism and essentialism: “But, Doctor, What does it really mean?”

How to Think Straight About Psychology by Sustanovich
Chapter 3
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Is it to answer deep questions like....
What are we here for?
What is the purpose of mankind?

Purpose of Science?

- Essentialists are caught up in the meaning of everything, specifically the meaning of each word. They want to have a “complete and unambiguous understanding of all the underlying language problems involved in usage”
 - Sustanovich page 36

Essentialists....

- The idea that concepts in scientific theories must in some way be grounded, or linked to observable events that can be measured.
- Allows personal intuition or feelings of an individual to be removed from the testing so anyone can carry out measurable operations.

Operationalists....

Personal experience

- Hunger:
- I have a “gnawing” feeling in my stomach”
- This is a person’s own interpretation and cannot be validated by observers



Operational Definitions

- Hunger:
- Measured by looking at blood sugar levels or having a set time of food deprivation
- These are operational because they can be measured by observers

- How do we defend psychology to be a science and also not expect psychology to answer to essentialism?

Psychology as a science

- Science takes it a step further by requiring a “set” of operations. A single behavior doesn’t determine a concept.

- Examples include intelligence testing

Need a set of operations
to determine a concept

Reliability

- Consistency of the measuring instrument

Validity

- Measuring instrument measures what it is intended to measure.

As scientists we want to see
high reliability *and* validity

- Physics, biology, and psychology all show evidence that scientific concepts evolve. This evolution occurs as we learn more about the concepts or have better ways to measure them.



Psychology: Memory used to be known as remembering or forgetting, now we test according to short-term acoustic memory, semantic memory, episodic memory

Astronomy: some scientists say Pluto is a planet, some scientists say it is not

Evolution of psychology is the same as other sciences

- Some are critical of psychology because theories have changed over time, even though this happens in other sciences.
 - The double standard is surprising. What do you think are the reasons for this?
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- Just relying on what “we know” but everyone probably “knows” something different.
- Depression to a lay person means something completely different to a psychologist
- People expect psychology to provide “absolute answers to complex questions” when other sciences are not expected to do this

Unique to Psychology: Humanization

- Why is Psychology expected to answer the “deep” questions when other sciences are not?
- How can we prevent ourselves from getting caught up in the essential definitions, when the general public expects psychology to answer these types of questions, and act as verifiable scientists?

Summary
