

## Applied social psychology

### Definition and Nature:

The goal of Social psychology is to present a set of integrated concepts to explain and predict how individuals are influenced by others. For this purpose, social psychologists formulate hypotheses, conduct research and develop theories not only to explain present behaviour but also to make predictions about such behaviour. Basic research deals with establishing a cause-effect relationship. For example, *does prolonged exposure to violence on mass media increase the likelihood of aggression?* Social psychologists are concerned with these and similar issues; they develop appropriate research methods and procedures to investigate the problem, collect data, and, provide explanations of present behaviour.

*It is assumed that eyewitnesses are susceptible to errors owing to misleading and suggestive questions. How do we improve the quality and accuracy of the eyewitness reports?* To solve this issue, researchers have devised ways to put to use the knowledge of behaviour in a social context. *Dauids and Bottoms (2002) demonstrated how children could be helped to resist suggestions while giving testimony. Parker and Myers (2001) have establishes empirically that children's eyewitness reports improve through practice.* These studies are good examples of how social psychological research can be applied to solve real life problems.

Applied Social Psychology refers to the branch of Social Psychology that draws on social psychological theories, principles, methods, and research evidence to contribute to (a) the understanding of social and practical problems and (b) the development of intervention strategies for improving the functioning of individuals, groups, organizations, communities, and societies with respect to social and practical problems. *Functioning* is broadly viewed as encompassing how well people perform or operate with respect to any one of many criteria including emotional and social adjustment, physical health, performance in school, work or athletics and so on.

As a branch of Social Psychology, applied social psychology relies on the scientific method and is guided by the core values of science. Applied social psychologists are motivated by the goals of science: description, prediction, determining causality, and explanation. However, they are also distinguished from other social psychologists by also having a strong interest in the fifth goal of science: control – being able to manipulate conditions that will cause changes in a phenomenon.

Applied social psychologist may conduct research that helps them to understand the nature and causes of phenomena that concern them. They design intervention strategies on the basis of existing theory and knowledge. Furthermore, their responsibility does not stop with careful, science-based design of intervention strategies but rather extends, for both scientific and ethical reasons, to the evaluation of the consequences of the interventions.

**Applied social psychology is therefore concerned with the development and implementation of intervention programs based on social-psychological principles so as to improve the quality of behaviour.** Applied social psychology does not stop with the mere study of social problems. An extremely important realm of applied social psychology is to develop interventions to solve the problems in our lives. The range of problems amenable to social psychological interventions is extremely wide, for example, *effects of TV on childhood aggression patterns, development of pro-environmental attitudes, getting people to use safe sex methods* etc.

*Let us take the example: Effect of watching violence on television in increasing the aggressive tendencies of children*

*Parents who enjoy watching violent programmes on television may act as models for their children and thereby reinforce their children's viewing violent programmes. An **intervention programme** would involve the use of psychological theory, such as reinforcement theory or social learning theory, to design an action plan to help parents understand how their own behaviour can reinforce their child's behaviour and what they should do to deal with the situation.*

### **Salient features of applied social psychology:**

#### **1. Firmly rooted in theory**

A theory serves three important functions in the design and application of an intervention program. **Firstly**, a theory defines the nature and focus of an intervention program. The nature of the theory defines and limits the operation of the intervention program. Moreover, a popular theory is easily accepted by experts and laypersons alike, and any intervention program based on such a popular theory is smoothly implemented and accepted in a community. In designing intervention programs, social psychologists often face a conflict in their preference for one theory over another.

**Secondly**, a good theory makes sound predictions. *If parents stop their viewing of violent programmes on television and notice that a change in their behaviour has an impact on their child's behaviour, this success of the intervention programme can be tested at various intervals.* Similarly, the failure of a program can also be tested if a theory is weak or its application unrealistic. In short,

a theory can help monitor the steps involved in an intervention program and explain the level of success of such a program at various stages.

**Finally**, according to Popper (1959), a good theory is one that keeps room for improvement. There are no absolute theories. As knowledge is acquired, a theory is modified or dismantled. If we field test interventions based on different theories and learn how improvements in behaviour can be achieved, we can develop effective intervention programs to solve real life problems.

## 2. Focus on applications

Most social scientists believe that a good theory leads to effective application and view the relationship between theory and practice as a one-way traffic. This was, however, the state of affairs when social psychology was developing its scientific roots and had not demonstrated sufficient applications in the real world. The perspective of this relationship has now changed. Sometimes it is difficult to draw a fine line separating the relationship between a theory and its practice. A major task in theory building is to gain knowledge and to explain and predict a phenomenon. Using such knowledge, applied social psychology makes an attempt to actually solve a problem in real life.

According to Weyant (1986), the **practical applications of social psychology** may be viewed in three categories: **basic, applicable and applied**. Basic research deals with the development of the theory and the refinement of concepts. The applicable aspect of social psychology is the potential for practical application.

## 3. The goal of applied social psychology is intervention

When social interventions are field tested and used as tools to solve problems, the nature of social psychology becomes applied. The concepts of social psychology have been used effectively to develop interventions and to find solutions in the areas of education, health, law, consumer behaviour, environment and many more.

The three-tier approach, as suggested by Weyant, in understanding the nature of practical applications of social psychology needs to be supplemented by the issue of applicability of intervention, that is, to what extent a programme is desirable and whether it is acceptable to the community.

*Let us take the issue of euthanasia. A patient who is not only terminally ill but also is suffering from unbearable pain and finds that there is no point in prolonging life, requests for medical assistance in ending his life. This patient wants to decide the future of his life, but the society does not grant him this right. If a physician assists him, he will be charged with murdering his patient.*

In this example, we find that the issue is our knowledge that the patient cannot be cured. The **applicable aspect** of the problem is concerned with our ability to develop an intervention programme such that patients can die without any additional suffering to what they have already had. Finally, the **applied nature** of intervention consists of a positive demonstration that such assisted suicide is possible. One issue that remains important is that of applicability, that is, the desirability of an intervention programme and its acceptance. Given the religious concerns about sanctity of life and other legal issues that vary from one culture or society to another, the issue of euthanasia has become very contentious. While it has been resolved in Holland, it is hotly debated in many other countries like USA. People differ in their approaches in dealing with this issue.