

PSYC3031 Conceptual Issues and Critical Debates in Psychology

Seminar: Lay theories and folk psychologies: This will take place in your timetabled seminar slots in week 22

The study of lay theories in psychology has roots in social and developmental psychology. Kelly (1955) and Heider (1958) proposed that lay people, like scientists, develop theories about their social world and that these theories help to create organizing frameworks, so that people can interpret and predict events and choose courses of action. Similarly, Piaget and Garcia (1983/1989) proposed that during development children develop conceptions of their world that inform their social judgments and actions.

As Furnham and Cheng (2000) describe, researchers have distinguished between three types of everyday theories that may be deployed to explain phenomena: *lay* theories which are thought of as personal and idiosyncratic; *folk* theories which are thought to be shared by certain subgroups; and *scientific* theories which are usually thought to be empirically and observationally derived and tested. Furnham (1988; Furnham and Cheng, 2000, ps. 227-228) says that research about lay theories is usually concerned with one or more of six different issues:

- 1) *Aetiology* (How do these theories develop? What factors seem to lead to the development of particular ideas?);
- 2) *Structure* (What is the internal structure of these theories? How is the mental architecture arranged?);
- 3) *Relationships* (How are various theories about different topics grouped or linked? What is the underlying structure of lay theories in different areas . . . health, economics, education?);
- 4) *Function* (What function do theories hold for the individuals themselves? What are the implications for change?);
- 5) *Stability* (Do these theories change over time? What sort of things influence them?);
- 6) *Behavioural Consequences* (How is social behaviour related to these different theories?).

So there are the six different aspects.

Now let's see what we can discover about lay theories.

Because there isn't time to get empirical investigations using people past the ethics committee, instead we can use already-published sources such as the mass media. Use the Lexis Library database of newspaper articles that the library subscribes to and look up what's been published on the topic below. When you first log in it looks like it's all about law, but there is a button on one of the top rows that says 'news' which allows you to search newspapers. There are several different versions of the task, so use the one you get in class on the 16th of February, not your friends' because then we'll have something to talk about

There is also some material relating to lay theories if you follow the links relating to this module from <http://www.brown.uk.com/teaching/conceptualissues/laylist.htm> or go to my web page at <http://www.brown.uk.com> and follow the links to the teaching resources.

Lifestyle Gurus

These days it seems very common to have a lifestyle guru. Issues and dilemmas which people once might have lived with and resolved themselves are subject to a whole variety of interventions and supervision by 'experts'. Even the (ex)Prime Minister's family famously had Carole Caplin. Everybody seems to want one. What I want you to do is find out what the press has had to say about lifestyle gurus, life coaches, style consultants and the like over the last year. This can be the local press or the national press. It can be news about incidents, commentary pieces, interviews with celebrities; anything you like. What we're interested in is the "lay theories" that are being displayed in popular journalism. In searching for material you might try terms such as lifestyle, life coach, style, or even terms such as therapy, beauty feng shui or anything reminiscent of theory or healing as this all seems to be part of the phenomenon.

So, come to the seminar session armed with some news items and we'll see if we can identify some of the lay theories which people are using to construct news stories. Of course, news stories aren't the same as what's 'in peoples heads', but seeing as there's some degree of commonality between the public and the mass media, in terms of shared concepts and frames of reference, maybe we're accessing 'lay theories'.

References

- Furnham, A. (1988) *Lay Theories*, Oxford: Pergamon.
- Furnham, A. and Cheng, H. (2000) Lay theories of happiness, *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 1, 227–246,
- Heider, F. (1958). *The psychology of interpersonal relations*. New York: Wiley.
- Kelly, G. A. (1955). *The psychology of personal constructs*. New York: Norton.
- Piaget, J., & Garcia, R. (1989). *Psychogenesis and the history of the sciences* (H. Fielder, Trans.). Paris: Flammarion (Original work published 1983).