**Conceptual issues and critical debates in psychology PSYC3031 Week 21 Everyday understandings of psychological and social phenomena**

In addition to this lecture handout there are a number of other things on my website
http://www.brown.uk.com or there's a bit specifically about these sessions here:
http://www.brown.uk.com/teaching/conceptualissues/freewill.htm

**Common sense** – Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937)
'Common sense is not something rigid and stationary, but is in continuous transformation, becoming enriched with scientific notions and philosophical opinions that have entered into common circulation. 'Common sense' is the folklore of philosophy and always stands midway between folklore proper (folklore as it is normally understood) and the philosophy, science, and economics of the scientists. Common sense creates the folklore of the future, a relatively rigidified phase of popular knowledge in a given time and place' (Gramsci, 1985: 421).

For Gramsci, common sense comprises the "diffuse, unco-ordinated features of a general form of thought common to a particular period and a particular popular environment" (Gramsci 1971: 330). It contains "a healthy nucleus of good sense" which, he argues, "deserves to be made more unitary and coherent" (Gramsci 1971: 328). Gramsci says:
'Its most fundamental characteristic is that it is a conception which, even in the brain of one individual, is fragmentary, incoherent and inconsequential, in conformity with the social and cultural position of those masses whose philosophy it is. At those times when a homogeneous social group is brought into being, there comes into being also, in opposition to common sense, a homogeneous - in other words coherent and systematic - philosophy. (Gramsci 1971: 419)

**Learning together** the process of 'apprenticeship'
Lave and Wegner (1991) describe how communities learn and expertise is passed from one generation of artisans to the next. At an early stage in many occupations, new entrants undertake a good deal of fetching, carrying and making refreshments – this is called by Lave and Wenger 'legitimate peripheral participation'. Things are not quite the same in higher education teaching; nevertheless, this informal process of 'soaking up' the skills and practice of more experienced practitioners is an important way of learning about professional life, and one which can be harnessed in training and pedagogy.
'Learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and… the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community. 'Legitimate peripheral participation' provides a way to speak about the relations between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities, artefacts, and communities of knowledge and practice. A person's intentions to learn are engaged and the meaning of learning

is configured through the process of becoming a full participant in a sociocultural practice. This social process, includes, indeed it subsumes, the learning of knowledgeable skills' (Lave and Wenger 1991: 29) Lave and Wenger illustrate their theory on observations of different apprenticeships (Yucatec midwives, Vai and Gola tailors, US Navy quartermasters, meat-cutters, and non-drinking alcoholics in Alcoholics Anonymous). Initially people have to join communities and learn at the periphery. As they become more competent they move more to the 'centre' of the particular community. Learning is, thus, not seen as the acquisition of knowledge by individuals so much as a process of *social* participation. The nature of the *situation* impacts significantly on the process. If you are interested in this stuff, Wenger has a website http://www.ewenger.com where you can download some of his papers and his original doctoral dissertation on which the idea of communities of practice was based

## Folk Psychology

'The term 'folk psychology' is employed in philosophy and cognitive science to mean our commonsense, everyday ability to understand each other and negotiate the social world. Its main ingredient is usually taken to be an ability to assign intentional states (especially beliefs and desires) to humans and other organisms, in order to predict and/or explain their behaviour' (Ratcliffe, 2006: 31). Scholl and Leslie (1999: 132) 'a theory of mind refers to the capacity to interpret, predict, and explain the behaviour of others in terms of their underlying mental states. Frith and Happe (1999: 2) similarly describe folk psychology as the ability to attribute 'mental states to self and others in order to predict and explain behaviour'. Garfield et al (2001: 494) say that folk psychology 'is the cognitive achievement that enables us to report our propositional attitudes, to attribute such attitudes to others, and to use such postulated or observed mental states in the prediction and explanation of behaviour'.

## Lay Theories

Remember social representations from year 2? Lay theories are a little like social representations because scholars who study them are also devoted to understanding how lay people make sense of the world.

Levy et al (2005; 2006) define lay theories in this way: Like trained scientists, ordinary people seek ''to predict and control the course of events with which [they are] involved'' (Kelly, 1955, p. 5). People's naive theories ''achieve in some measure what science is supposed to achieve: an adequate description of the subject matter which makes prediction possible'' (Heider, 1958: 5). The way that early theorists characterized lay theories as 'naïve' (Heider, 1958), suggests they are not rigorously formulated. Also, lay theorists are thought to not necessarily be aware of the impact their lay theories have on their social understanding and behavior (e.g. Furnham, 1988; Hong et al., 2001; Wegener & Petty, 1998).

There has been an increasing interest in the perceptions of lay individuals regarding a number of psychological issues such as alcoholism (Furnham & Lowick, 1984); delinquency (Furnham & Henderson, 1983); depression (Furnham & Kuyken, 1991); homosexuality (Furnham &Taylor, 1990); phobia (Furnham, 1995); and schizophrenia (Furnham & Bower, 1992; Furnham & Rees, 1988) and bipolar disorder (Furnham and Anthony, 2010). In response to the suggestion that studying the perceived efficacy of various cures and therapies is of practical and theoretical importance (Furnham & Henley, 1988; Furnham & McDermott, 1994), various studies have looked specifically at lay perceptions of the causes (etiology) and cures (therapy) for specific problems, for example Russell et al (2010) and their study of lay beliefs about causes of autism, which tended to stress environmental contaminants and diet. Also, Furnham & Hume-Wright (1992) found consistent relationships between lay theories of cause and cure for anorexia nervosa. Subsequently Furnham & Thomson (1996) looked at lay theories for the cause and cure of heroin addiction.

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) A*etiology* (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?).

**Anorexia** In a study of lay theories of anorexia by Benveniste et al (1999) three discourses were identified, relating to aspects concerned with sociocultural factors, individual aspects and femininity,

1) **Sociocultural factors**: Here participants attributed a source of blame for anorexia nervosa to factors that they understood as being external to the individual, such as society, the media, family and friends.

Sally: . . . the media body image that's got through women's magazines and it's, you know, the way that women are portrayed, portrayed throughout both media and in society, in families. Type of idea of the beautiful woman as being the good woman. Um, and that beautiful woman recently has become thinner and thinner . . .

2) By contrast the **discourse of the individual** constructed the cause of anorexia nervosa in terms of factors internal to the individual, such as personality.

Julia: . . . People deal with situations differently, whereas one situation might turn you into an anorexic, another like, you know, another person, just a stronger personality. So, you know, you have to make life decisions all the time. Every day you're making like a decision, and one decision may turn out to be really, really important and turn into anorexic, anorexia, whereas you can make that decision and I think that all depends on the personality and how strong you are. (Benveniste et al, 1999, p. 63)

3) The **discourse of femininity** is one which associates specific qualities with being female, presumably in opposition to characteristics which are held to be synonymous with masculinity, and which are also integral to the social construction of anorexia nervosa (Hepworth & Griffin, 1990). This female–male dualism in which each sex is viewed as being fundamentally different (Davies, 1991) normalizes femininity and tends to draw attention away from differences between women in relation to class, sexuality and ethnicity. Instead it is assumed that all women aspire to achieve a certain standard of ideals (Bordo, 1989). In connection with this discourse, and the overwhelming number of diagnoses of anorexia nervosa in women, these qualities have dominated common conceptions and explanations in both the lay and professional sphere.

**Suicide** Lay theories of suicide were studied by Knight et al, (2000). They found that participants with higher EPQ psychoticism scores appeared to hold more positive views toward suicide. They supported the right to commit suicide more strongly, were more likely to view suicide as normal and saw suicide as less of a moral transgression. Furthermore, the associations of attitudes toward suicide were much stronger for psychoticism than for the trait of neuroticism

**Happiness**
Furnham and Cheng (2000) examined lay theories of happiness using a questionnaire methodology and identified six major factors, namely:
1) *Mental Strength & Personality Traits*  was concerned with being mentally strong and having self-control, whilst also possessing personality traits such as extraversion and being emotionally more stable. This accounted for nearly a quarter  of the variance.
2) P*ersonal Advantages*, because the items were primarily concerned with being physically advantageous and having a higher education.
3) A*chievement & Freedom in Life and Work* concerned with an individual's freedom of choice within their lives.
4) *Social Support & Esteem* including having close friends in whom you can trust and esteem (self respect and respect from others).

5) *Security* in terms of finance and housing.
6) *Optimism & Contentment* with adopting a bright outlook and taking life as it is.

**Critique and limitations of lay theories research**
Assumptions
**1) Individualism:** Research tends to assume that individuals' accounts are unitary and internally consistent which is open to question, empirically. Even small changes in question wording and ordering can produce very different results. The focus on individuals means that organisational and political theories and explanations are less frequently investigated. As a result a whole area of potential research materials like government press releases, ministerial statements, political manifestos, multinational corporation strategies and annual reports and so on are ignored.
**2) Stability:** Many lay theories studies tend to assume the existence of underlying attributional structures which remain stable over time and across situations. In the face of variability researchers still frequently assume a stable core that presumably remains the same in different incarnations.
**3) Constructed nature:** A third difficulty with traditional research is that items and factors are taken out of their context and examined individually. Heaven (1994) says this over-simplifies how people make explanations since causes are often interconnected. Furnham has noted that explanations for poverty may be used variably both by different groups of subjects and according to which poor 'target group' is specified (Furnham, 1982).
**4) Lack of attention to the functions and effects of particular kinds of lay theories**. There is a startling lack of curiosity about what effects and functions the explanations provided might have. Most studies find relationships between individual explanations and social psychological variables or demographic factors but there is often little attempt to explain further. What is missing in a good deal of the lay theories literature is an attempt to make sense of the role of political beliefs or ideology in structuring our views of the world, since explanations have ideological effects. Thus Finchilescu (1991) has argued that the biasing of attributions and explanations constitutes a discriminatory practice. Billig comments: "To probe the ideological significance of these attributions one needs to go further than documenting their existence.  One needs to discover how the explanation of one sort of social event fits into a wider pattern of explaining social events" (Billig, 1988, p. 201).

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