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What is Psychology?

States of Consciousness

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States of Consciousness



Slide # 1

Psychologists have been interested in studying consciousness since the times of William James. Humanist and cognitive theorists helped the concept of consciousness become a focal point in psychology.

An Early Pioneer: William James



- Medical training
- Teacher of psychology
- He was interested in the nature of consciousness

Slide # 2

Bullet # 1 William James was the brother of novelist Henry James. He had trained to be a doctor but had never practiced medicine. As a professor at Harvard, he taught biology, physiology, and eventually offered his first college psychology course in 1875.

Bullet # 2 He had never taken a course in psychology before he taught a course in psychology, because no such course existed at the time. There was not even a textbook available for him to use, so he wrote his own called, *Principles of Psychology*.

Bullet # 3 James believed that consciousness was a continuous process in which one thought flowed into another.

Definition of Consciousness

- State of awareness of ourselves and our world
- It includes our thoughts, feelings, sensations, and perceptions
- States of consciousness

Slide # 3

Bullet # 1 James's ideas about consciousness strongly influenced modern thinkers. He characterized consciousness as a "state of awareness" which encompassed many things.

Bullet # 2 James believed that a part of this awareness includes our thoughts, feelings, sensations, and perceptions.

Bullet # 3 When psychologists use the phrase "states of consciousness," they are referring to a spectrum of different conditions. Imagine a straight line with two endpoints: at one endpoint is full waking consciousness; at the other is complete unconsciousness. "States of consciousness" refers not only to the two endpoints, but to everything in between as well.

Levels of awareness



- Focused awareness

Slide # 4

Most psychologists believe that consciousness is selective. In other words, we have the ability to focus our consciousness. Athletes often experience a focused state of awareness in which they concentrate only on the immediate task at hand. They have learned to block out all external stimuli. They often refer to this state of mind as “being in the zone.” When we are focused, we are wide awake, fully alert, and fully engrossed. Former St. Louis Cardinal Mark McGwire (depicted on the slide) used this type of focus when he hit 70 home runs in his record-breaking 1998 season.

Drifting Awareness



- Daydreaming

Slide # 5

It's pretty hard to always stay focused. After a while your mind begins to drift; this may lead to daydreaming, which is a form of consciousness during a waking state. People are more prone to drifting awareness when they are bored or not engaged in some activity.

Divided Consciousness



- The ability to divide consciousness allows us to perform more than one task at a time
- Dangers

Slide # 6

Bullet # 1 When we first learn a new skill, we need to be focused; after we sharpen that skill, not as much focus is required. For example, when a person first learns how to drive a car he or she is entirely focused. People who have been driving for some time don't need to exercise the same degree of focus, and are capable of "dividing" their consciousness. For them, driving has become an over-learned skill: it is so ingrained that they can perform another task at the same time, like talking on a cell phone. Just because an experienced driver has the ability to drive and talk on a cell phone at the same time, however, it doesn't mean it's a good idea.

Bullet # 2 According to one 2001 study, drivers are four times more likely to have an automobile accident when they are using a cell phone in the car. It is almost as dangerous as driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

Unconsciousness

- Both sleep and dreaming are examples of unconsciousness
- Definition: lack of awareness of one's surroundings or loss of consciousness



Slide # 7

The best examples of unconsciousness are sleep and dreaming. When a person lacks awareness of his/her surroundings, it is called a “loss of consciousness.”