

PSYCHOLOGY REVIVALS

# **Psychology and Social Problems**

**Michael Argyle**



## Psychology and Social Problems

First published in 1964 *Psychology and Social Problems* looks at a changing society and research into problems of the time. Many of the themes in the book, such as delinquency, mental health and racial conflict and are still familiar and current topics of discussion today.

Social scientists had carried out extensive research into problems of urgent public concern, yet their findings were not widely known or understood and they had often been diffident in advocating policies based on their conclusions. Michael Argyle discussed the recent psychological and social research bearing on the origins of aggression, delinquency, mental disorder, racial and international prejudice, and industrial discontent; he went on to consider the implications of these studies for prevention and control and for the guidance of social change. This sophisticated and well-documented critique is presented with such lucidity and verve that it will appeal equally to laymen and to students and professional workers and can now be enjoyed in its historical context.

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# Psychology and Social Problems

Michael Argyle

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‘What is most novel and refreshing about this book is the fact that the author documents all his remarks, suggestions, and discussions very fully by reference to experimental researches . . . the style is crisp, to the point of being staccato, but every sentence is clear, definite, and factual. This is so unusual in writings on social topics that it will come as a revelation to many readers who had not previously realized the wealth of factual information on all these topics.’

H. J. Eysenck, *British Journal of Industrial Relations*

‘Each part is full of interesting information and brief but adequate summaries of relevant research. Altogether the book offers the intelligent layman a glimpse into the psychologist’s workshop describing his plans, some of his tools, and his products.’

Marie Jahoda, *Occupational Psychology*

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# PSYCHOLOGY AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS

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MICHAEL ARGYLE

*Lecturer in Social Psychology  
in the University of Oxford*



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*For Miranda, Nicholas, Rosalind and Ophelia*

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## PREFACE

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In recent years our society has been transformed through the efforts of economists, political reformers, technologists and others. The trade cycle has been controlled, educational opportunities have been created and prosperity has increased. However, we have an increasing rate of delinquency, mental ill-health, racial conflict and industrial discontent. For human welfare and happiness it is just as important that these problems should be solved as it is to reduce material poverty and bodily ill-health; it is as important that workers should be happy as that they should work hard. Research over the last few years by social scientists has thrown a lot of light on these problems, and we know something of the social measures which could be taken to solve them. In this book an attempt has been made to outline the main conclusions of this research and to review the methods of social control which could be employed.

I am indebted to Dr Peter Robinson for his valuable comments on the whole book and to the following for commenting on particular chapters: Dr R. G. Andry, Mr Tom Burns, Dr E. R. F. W. Crossman, Dr Henri Tajfel, Dr Jack Tizard, Dr Nigel Walker and Dr Bryan Wilson. Once again I am grateful to Miss Janet Burnett Brown for deciphering and typing the MS.

MICHAEL ARGYLE  
1964

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Part I

THE ELEMENTS  
OF SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR



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## Chapter 1

# PERSONALITY

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### THE CONSISTENCY OF HUMAN BEHAVIOUR

A great deal of psychological research consists of changing the situation experimentally and observing the kind of behaviour which is produced. We shall see later that the same person on different occasions can show great variations in the amount of aggressiveness, anxiety, friendliness or domination displayed. However, individuals in the *same* situation, such as a lecture, do not all respond in the same way. The same people observed in another situation moreover may be found to behave in a similar way again – those who were asleep in the lecture are also asleep at a sermon or an after-dinner speech. If consistency is found in a series of such situations, one can predict how a person is likely to behave in a whole class of similar settings. Other factors are also involved, some lecturers are more boring and some lecture rooms more stuffy, so that a higher proportion of those present will be asleep. To predict whether a particular person will be asleep on a given occasion we need to know both his personality characteristics and the nature of the situation. Thus while the particular behaviour may vary as a result of situational factors, one person A may consistently respond more sleepily, intelligently or neurotically than another person B. In fact there is extensive evidence that people do behave consistently in such ways – they are not simply collections of isolated conditioned reflexes as was once supposed, but respond to different situations with great consistency.

The most extensive evidence for such consistency of personality comes from the factor analysis of personality traits. A hundred or more subjects are given a number of tests, or their behaviour is recorded in a number of different situations. If correlations are calculated between each test and all the other tests, it is found that the tests are not independent of one another, but cluster together in

groups or 'factors'. Within each group the tests are highly correlated with one another, but not with tests in other groups. In some areas of behaviour, such as intelligence<sup>1</sup> and neurotic tendency<sup>2</sup> there is considerable consistency: most of the possible tests correlate together, and the correlations are large.

#### PERSONALITY TRAITS AND THEIR RELATIONS

We will now consider in more detail the procedures used in the study of personality traits. The correlations between a number of tests are calculated, and the problem is to find the basic factors which will most economically account for them. There is a straightforward mathematical procedure for extracting the 'first factor', which represents what is common to all the tests used. Similarly the second factor represents what is common to what is left when the variation due to the first factor has been eliminated, and so on for further factors.\* However, these so-called 'first-order factors' are not a satisfactory final solution, since they will reflect the numbers of tests of different kinds which have been used, and fail to yield a stable or 'invariant' set of factors. Consequently it is usual to 'rotate the axes', in other words to regroup the variables under a revised set of final factors in order to give a superior and more stable solution. It is at this point that factor analysis becomes art rather than science, since subjective elements are often involved, if for example the psychological meaningfulness of the factors is thought important.

Factor analysis has been much criticized – partly on the grounds that different solutions can be arrived at from the same data, and because the mathematical basis is dubious. On the other hand it is extremely useful to know how many independent factors are involved in a given area: for example it was found that suggestibility could not be accounted for by one general factor, but that three independent factors were needed.<sup>3</sup> It is also valuable to know how far there is consistency in a given area, as shown by the presence of a clear general factor: this is found for intelligence, but not for honesty.<sup>4</sup>

A simpler version of factor analysis, with a more straightforward mathematical basis, is 'cluster analysis'. Here there is no extraction of first-order factors, but simply a systematic search for groups of

\* This refers to the Centroid method of factor analysis; for further details see reference 5.

variables which are highly correlated together. The clusters need not be independent of one another, since the aim is simply to discover which variables belong together. Methods for discovering such clusters have been devised.<sup>5</sup>

Eysenck has developed the factor analysis of personality traits in a particular way.<sup>2</sup> His method is to study one hypothesised dimension at a time, using a large number of tests which would be expected to vary with, for example, neuroticism. He extracts a first general factor and rotates it to give a maximum separation of criterion groups, in this case, of normal and neurotic subjects. It may be felt that selecting the tests used in this way means that you get out only what you put in: this is not the case, as is shown by the example of suggestibility above. The use of criterion groups avoids the subjectivity of other methods of rotation and also validates the factors obtained. One drawback with this approach is that it produces factors which are very broad, in that they affect almost all behaviour, but also very weak in that they don't affect it very much. If neuroticism, or extraversion, correlates 0.3 with performance on some test, this only accounts for 9% of the total variation in that test. For this reason many investigators prefer to work with a number of more specific traits.

When large numbers of people have to be compared, as in personnel selection and in research, general personality traits are very useful. Factorial research tells us which are the best dimensions to use (i.e. which give the highest predictions over the broadest range), how many dimensions are needed, and how the dimensions are related to one another. Eysenck showed for example that psychoticism was not a further degree of neuroticism, but an independent dimension.<sup>2</sup> Intelligence tests provide the highly successful model, which personality research has followed. In addition to discovering the basic components of intelligence, and their statistical relations, we also have valid tests, and know precisely what proportion of the population lie between, for example, IQ 130 and 140.<sup>1</sup>

It is sometimes objected that the use of general dimensions fails to tell us much about any individual – he appears merely as a combination of scores on a number of general traits, IQ 127, neuroticism 25, and so on. For such purposes as personnel selection, we do not need to get any nearer to the individual. In World War II the Allies used these methods for officer selection with great success, while the Germans had to abandon their selection based on intensive clinical

methods. If it is known how each trait is correlated with success at the job, selection is best performed by a mechanical application of the relevant tests.

For clinical purposes however it is possible to get nearer to a satisfactory picture of the individual personality if the *interactions* between dimensions are considered. A given trait may produce quite different behaviour if a second trait is also present. For example, dominance combined with high sociability is manifested as advising, co-ordinating and leading, but when combined with low sociability (coldness) it is seen as criticizing, disapproving and judging. Research on tests such as the MMPI and the California Personality Inventory has shown that people with certain profiles over a number of traits have recognizable characteristics<sup>6</sup>.

In the field of human abilities it is possible to arrive at two quite different factorial interpretations, both of which are equally satisfactory from a statistical point of view. The solution favoured by most British intelligence testers is to extract a general factor of intelligence, which represents the maximum common variance, together with a number of less important 'group factors' which provide corrections for the prediction of an individual's abilities in particular areas – spatial, verbal and so on. The American testers prefer a profile approach using 7–8 multiple factors, which are all on the same level, are not independent and give a person's abilities in a number of areas.<sup>1</sup> The first approach has the advantage of providing a measure of general ability, purified of special skills in particular areas. The second method, however, enables us to make use, in personnel selection, of the fact that abilities are *not* perfectly correlated so that maximum use can be made of those with any particular combination of talents (p. 140).

Dimensions of ability, expressive traits or motivation, can be measured by placing people in any situation where there are individual differences in the response made, and where these correlate with the factor in question. In practice the tests used are questionnaires, projection tests or objective behavioural tests. For a test to be satisfactory it must be *valid*, i.e. be known to measure what it is supposed to measure. This can be shown by giving the test to contrasted groups of people, such as neurotics and normals, or by finding the correlation between the test and the other variables comprising the factor. Tests should also be *reliable*, i.e. give the same score on different occasions, or when different testers administer or

score the test. Questionnaires are easy to construct and are reliable, but often not valid – subjects may conceal the truth from the tester, and perhaps also from themselves. Projection tests are often both unreliable and invalid, but have been used to measure motivation with some success, as shown in the next chapter. Objective tests of group behaviour are used in personnel selection and are found to give good predictions.<sup>7</sup> Personnel selection is discussed further in Chapter 11.

#### PERSONALITY TYPES AND MECHANISMS

The postulation of personality ‘types’ belongs to the early history of psychology, but some of the types are still in use, and the approach has certain merits. The division of people into types like introvert and extravert, dominant and submissive, has the defect that only a few people fall at the recognizable extremes, and most fall in between. It is more useful to have a continuous dimension of introversion–extraversion, on which people can be given numerical scores, as they can for intelligence. We know now that some of the typologies which were suggested do not correspond to dimensions of any statistical generality, so that such types would not be very informative about the behaviour of those placed in them – the statistical analysis of trait structure is needed before we can tell which types will be most useful.

One typology in common use is that of mental disorders, largely derived from a classification due to Kraepelin. If it is believed that mental disorders result from specific organic causes – as some certainly do – then types rather than dimensions are called for. If treatments are diverse and discontinuous, such as psychotherapy and ECT, the same conclusion follows. However, many patients present a mixed or intermediate set of symptoms, and a lot of clinical time is taken up by arguments about which pigeon-hole and which treatment is more appropriate. We suggest later that the adoption of dimensional analysis would simplify diagnosis for a wide range of behaviour disorders (p. 75). Criminologists are faced by similar problems, as they too have to allocate people to different types of treatment. No typology has yet been agreed on, but responsiveness to the treatments available would be the most useful basis for classification (p. 60).

There are certain advantages of a typological, as opposed to a

dimensional, approach to personality. It is found that some patterns of response, including forms of social learning and defence-mechanisms (p. 79f) occur only in certain people, and are not universal tendencies. Psychoanalysts have pointed to such processes in individuals<sup>8</sup> without discovering the empirical conditions under which they would be expected. Statistically-minded psychologists, supposing that empirical laws apply universally to all people, have failed to take account of such processes. The writer has developed an empirical procedure for discovering the range of people for whom a given process operates – this leads to the delineation of a new kind of personality type.<sup>9</sup> We shall find at several points throughout the book that a given response – conformity, delinquency, racial hostility etc. – may be generated by a number of personality mechanisms. These are additive in their effects, and each is particularly operative for a certain type of person.

#### THE ORIGINS OF PERSONALITY

After many years of research into the question there is still disagreement about the relative importance of inheritance and environment in personality formation. The evidence from twin studies, however, is fairly clear – all aspects of personality are partly inherited, but the importance of inheritance varies greatly for different ones. More detailed consideration is given later to the inheritance of mental disorders (p. 77) and delinquency (p. 61). While the genetic element in juvenile delinquency is very small, psychoses like schizophrenia are primarily inherited. General personality traits such as intelligence and neuroticism occupy an intermediate position,<sup>10</sup> while attitudes and beliefs are very largely determined by environment.

In addition to discovering the importance of inheritance for different aspects of personality, research has shown the genetic mechanisms responsible. General traits are inherited in a multi-genetic manner, while some mental disorders and forms of mental deficiency are inherited by single recessive or dominant genes. This knowledge is valuable for giving genetic advice, in particular whether two people should have children when there is the chance of inheritance of some disorder.

What is not inherited is acquired, especially during childhood as a result of experiences in the family. Psychoanalytic theory has inspired much of the research into the effects of socialization – study

of the influence of early feeding and toilet training experiences, for example. While the importance of relations with parents has been confirmed, many specific hypotheses have not, and others have been found not to be universal. Some of the main findings concerning personality development have no obvious explanation in terms of this theory, and were certainly not predicted by it – such as the effects of permissive versus strict socialization, and the various effects of birth order. An example of a Freudian hypothesis which has been definitely refuted is the hypothesis that early or traumatic toilet training should lead to an anal personality. The Oedipus theory has been found not to be universal.<sup>11</sup> However, psychoanalytic theory is still a most valuable source of hypotheses, especially about complex, and non-universal processes, such as introjection, with which we shall deal below. The other main results of socialization research are reviewed in Chapter 9, the Freudian method of interpreting motivational states on p. 21 and the efficacy of psychoanalytic treatment on p. 85f.

More recent research on socialization has been conducted within the framework of learning theory, originally constructed to account for the behaviour of rats in mazes. This directed attention away from feeding and toilet training to patterns of reward and punishment. It is the main value of theories to suggest variables to study and hypotheses to test. Some aspects of socialization can certainly be understood in terms of learning theory – the fact that weaning is more disturbing after a long period of breast-feeding, and the fact that delinquency and inadequate conscience-formation will result if discipline is feeble or inconsistent. There have been some extensions of learning theory to deal with phenomena in this field which can be explained by psychoanalytic theory. The theory of conflict and displacement is the most successful instance of this (p. 53f.). It is possible that by means of additional hypotheses we may be able to account for all of the findings about socialization within the reward and punishment framework of learning theory, but so far this has not been done. For example, why is it that conscience-formation is produced by psychological but not by physical punishment, and why do children identify with people they have never met and where there is no obvious reinforcement?

To account for these and a number of other findings there are advantages in postulating processes of social learning, foreshadowed by psychoanalytic theory, and possibly reducible to basic learning