



Exploring Psychology

Exploring Psychology: What is Consciousness?

Nick

Consciousness is a difficult topic within psychology. Partly this is because there are substantive obstacles facing any attempt to explain consciousness. Partly it is because consciousness has sometimes been considered not to be a legitimate topic for investigation. Partly, it is because different researchers bring their own perspectives and assumptions to the subject and partly because it is not always clear what is meant by the word consciousness. Richard Stevens has written extensively on consciousness. His tri-modal theory, a comprehensive theory of human action, aims to provide a framework for inter relating different kinds of psychological understanding. He was also a founder member of the consciousness & experiential section of the BPS.

Frederick Totes has written extensively on the psychology of stress, ethnology and motivation. As well as trying to keep order, I will also be injecting something of my own perspective into the discussion, a perspective that comes from cognitive science and is informed by my research into concepts categorisation and language acquisition.

We will be trying to divide the discussion to consider three main issues. First, there is a question as to what we mean by the word consciousness. What exactly are we referring to when we talk of consciousness? Second, there is a question as to how adequately some of the theories raised in the chapter begin to explain consciousness. Lastly, we'll spend some time considering whether it's plausible, to think that science, or psychology understood as a science could ever provide an explanation of consciousness.

Perhaps we can turn to the first of these three questions. Richard, Perhaps I can start with you first. You've written on the integration of different aspects of psychology into a single comprehensive theory that might make us think you are best placed to tell us what consciousness means. What do you think the word consciousness means?

Richard Stevens:

Well, if I could just talk first about the way the word consciousness is used, you made this point in the introduction. I do think one of the problems with dealing with consciousness is that the word is used in very different ways by different people. What you essentially seem to get is a kind of consciousness becomes a rag-bag for all sorts of different kinds of cognitive phenomena, so thoughts, beliefs, what people are aware of, everything goes into this notion of consciousness. I mean one useful feature of the chapter I think, as you point out, some of the different kinds of consciousness that are discussed, like access consciousness, being able to monitor ones own thought processes, the idea of consciousness itself, so there's different ways which you point out in the chapter. But actually if you go back over the course and look at some of the other chapters there are topics there, which are not labelled consciousness as such, but are dealing with very much the same kind of issues. If you take Chapter Six on 'Perception', for example, when you are 'perceiving' something, when you see something, well that's being conscious of something. So, presumably, all the processes one's trying to use to explain perception, must in some sense underpin conscious awareness. Or if you're using the concept of attention, and the way people use it, like William James's definition of consciousness, it's very much what it is one is aware of. So it's again very similar to consciousness, so the point I am making is that I think the concept of consciousness within the framework of psychology is used very loosely and covers a whole range of different kinds of processes and phenomenon. So I think what I would want to do is to restrict the use of the term, to make it useful and I would want to restrict it to what you term in the chapter as being 'phenomenal consciousness'. In other words, what it is I am aware of at this very moment. That for me is what I would like to term consciousness.

Nick

Okay. Thanks Richard, Fred, perhaps I can turn to you. Richard is portraying a picture whereby psychology hasn't really done its work properly. We've got this term consciousness being used but we haven't been at all clear about what it means. Is that your view?

Frederick Totes

Yes. To some extent it is and I think, I regret to have to say that, what I could contribute from a biological perspective is perhaps some insights into all the other bits of the rag-bag as Richard calls it other than phenomenal consciousness. One can see good arguments as to why, for example, information processing in the brain should have a specialised compartment, say, that we call conscious. In order to give direction and unity to behaviour, coherence to behaviour, and for sophisticated species, one can see why for example the capacity to model the intentions of another could be useful, and might well have evolved. But I guess this is doing all the background bits, the necessarily bits that lead up to phenomenal consciousness. It doesn't really give you much purchase on phenomenal consciousness.

Nick

And I guess that's not just true of biological approaches but also of cognitive ones.

Frederick Totes

Yes, well perhaps you're in the best position to illustrate that for us.

Nick

Well, I'm thinking of the accounts that perhaps someone like James Reason gives of action slips, where our monitoring of our own consciousness somehow goes array and he gives examples where people have unwrapped sweets, and popped the wrapper in their mouth and thrown the sweet in the bin and it's as if at one critical stage of the complex sequences of actions, there's not sufficient attention given to that sequence, and so things go array. That seems to be quite a helpful way of thinking about some of the processes involved, in that part of consciousness. But when it comes to the consciousness that Richard wants to restrict the term to, phenomenal consciousness, there I'm not sure that information processing helps us at all in understanding what it is perhaps to have a feel, or some raw feeling or experience associated with a perceptual event, let's say.

Frederick

What it's like to be a human. I am not sure it can illuminate that.

Nick

Well if biological and cognitive approaches don't really help us understand this thing called phenomenal consciousness, what does? Richard, I think you've got some ideas as to how we might approach this.

Richard

Well, the thought occurred to me, and if I'm criticising the psychology for not using consciousness precisely enough then it's incumbent on me to actually look at what consciousness is. Well, consciousness is a first person subjective phenomenon so what I set out to do, is to actually become aware in a very systematic way of what it is I am conscious of in the immediate awareness. I did this with a friend, over a period of time, over a period of ten days. We spent an hour or two individually, reflecting on what it is we're conscious of and then come back together to discuss this. Bit of a problem at first because I found that trying to think about what it was I was aware of was actually contaminated if you, or affected by my preconceptions of what consciousness is. For example, I used to think of something like 'reflective' consciousness as opposed to 'immediate' consciousness and it took me some time to get beyond that conception and really tune in to what actually I'm consciousness of. When I did that, and at the end of the process it came up for me with some very surprising results and which I found not very comfortable at first. Because to me, it seemed, when I really examined it that consciousness was essentially about perceiving, perceptual sensory phenomena. What I'm aware of is people, colour, shapes, trees, objects things like thoughts, ideas. These are not conscious, it seemed to me, these were part of unconscious processing. They may actually inform what it is I'm aware of, but they're not part of

consciousness. So what I'm saying is conscious, phenomenal consciousness, is essentially perceptual. It's about what you can see, about what you can hear, about what you can taste. And not just about actual ongoing process but of course about remembered images. They're much more shadowy but remembering something that you saw, you heard and so on. And also, this will include the remembered thought, experience, sounds of language words, or images of words. And these themselves, rather like the percept, carry meaning with them, they carry implicit meanings, it's not meanings which are present, but meanings which give you a feel, if you like, for what it is. If I look at you, I see Nick for example and I know Nick, so it's not just looking at a stranger, so, there are implicit meanings in my percept. And the same is true for when I hear the sound of a word that I know. That that will have implicit meanings. but the meaning itself it not present in consciousness it's implicit, if you like.

Nick

And consciousness would also have this feeling aspect to it, the raw feel of these experiences.

Richard

Well, I suppose the point I am trying to get at here, is that I am talking now, and I've no idea, I'm not conscious of the thoughts which are underpinning what it is I'm saying. I just hear the sound of my words. When I hear the sound of my words, implicitly I understand what it is I am saying.

Nick

Well thanks Richard. Fred, do you think this illuminates a nature of consciousness?

Frederick Tote

Something that worries me about it all, is that presumably for consciousness to have emerged, it must do some job of work. In terms of the ultimate arbiter of something in evolution it's whether it's useful in terms of well, spreading genes is the standard story as to why things have been selected. Now consciousness presumably comes at a cost in terms of the size of brain necessary to support it and I would therefore want to see some kind of role in terms of modulating responsivity to events or some kind of executive function in controlling behaviour and I'm not sure I got that out of what I heard from Richard.

Richard

No. I think that's a very good point Fred. I do think it does serve that function. And I didn't elaborate that. The function I think it serves, it allows consciousness, allows us, to have a multi modal intractive view, representation of the world around us. For example, you can link the sight of something you can see say, something coming at you and you can hear the sound and connect the two, so it constructs a multi modal representation within the mind. That is what I see the function of phenomenal consciousness.

Fred

And that representation has got to somehow link with action.

Richard

Well obviously it would do if you have a model of the world in which you live. A conscious awareness where the difference sensory inputs are inter-related and integrated that provides you with a basis on which to act. Maybe we should throw this back to you then Nick, and to ask you to briefly say what the cognitive approach is all about.

Nick

From the cognitive point of view, I think consciousness seems strangely demarcated in some ways. We have, I think, good reasons to think that information processing tells us about access consciousness, how we can get information from the sensors and that information to be passed on to other processes and so on. I think we have reasons to think that monitoring consciousness might be explained in a broadly similar way. In fact James reasoned in his 'Analysis of Actions', Letts proposed, distinctions between two kinds of information processing, controlled and roughly controlled and automatic processing. But it does seem, when we come to this issue of phenomenal consciousness, we're rather struggling. Firstly to

find the words to kind of frame the issues sensibly and then struggling to find the methods to connect it to what we conventionally take to be the core of psychology. Would that be a..

Richard

Cognitive psychology does seem to me to really more focus on the unconscious, what you call, computational processes that underpin what we experience, rather than consciousness itself. Would you think that was a ..

Nick

I think that's absolutely right..