Describe

Donna says that when she was a child, she wondered what people were saying to her because words were just lists of meaningless sounds. When people or things bothered her, she would endlessly tap or twirl her fingers to create movements that completely held her attention and helped her escape from a world that often made no sense.

The first goal of psychology is to describe the different ways that organisms behave.

As psychologists begin to describe the behaviors and mental processes of autistic children, such as difficulties in learning language, they begin to understand how autistic children behave. After describing behavior, psychologists try to explain behavior, the second goal.

Explain

Donna’s mother believed that autism was caused by evil spirits. Donna thinks her autism may result from metabolic imbalance. The second goal of psychology is to explain the causes of behavior.

Six explanations of autism have changed as psychologists learn more about this complex problem. In the 1950s, psychologists explained that children became autistic if they were reared by parents who were cold and rejecting (Blakeslee, 2000). In the 1990s, researchers discovered that autism is caused by genetic and biological factors that result in a maldeveloped brain (Courchesne et al., 2003). Being able to describe and explain behavior helps psychologists reach the third goal, which is to predict behavior.

Predict

Donna says that one of her biggest problems is being so overloaded by visual sensations that she literally freezes in place. She tries to predict when she will freeze up by estimating how many new stimuli she must adjust to. The third goal of psychology is to predict how organisms will behave in certain situations.

However, psychologists may have difficulty predicting how autistic children will behave in certain situations unless they have already described and explained their behaviors. For example, from the first two goals, psychologists know that autistic children are easily overwhelmed by strange stimuli and have difficulty paying attention. Based on this information, psychologists can predict that autistic children will have difficulty learning in a school environment because there are too many activities and stimuli in the classroom (Heflin & Alaimo, 2006; M. Pittman, 2007). However, if psychologists can predict behavior, then they can often control behavior.

Control

Donna knows one reason she fears meeting people is that social interactions cause a tremendous sensory overload that makes her freeze up. She controls her social fear by making a rule to meet only one person at a time.

For some psychologists, the fourth goal of psychology is to control an organism’s behavior.

However, the idea of control has both positive and negative sides. The positive side is that psychologists can help people, such as Donna, learn to control undesirable behaviors by teaching better methods of self-control and ways to deal with situations and relationships (Eikeseth et al., 2007; Hall, 2008). The negative side is the concern that psychologists might control people’s behaviors without their knowledge or consent. In Module 2, we’ll discuss the strict guidelines that psychologists have established to prevent potential abuse of controlling behavior and to protect the rights and privacy of individuals, patients, and participants in experiments. Because many behaviors, such as autism, are enormously complex, psychologists use a combination of different approaches to reach the four goals of describing, explaining, predicting, and controlling behavior. To reach these goals, psychologists may use one or a combination of the following seven approaches.

Read more: Introduction to Psychology: by Rod Plotnik and Haig Kouyoumdjian published by Wadsworth.