Module 8 Objectives:
Kuther Chapter 10: Section on Personal Statements
You will learn:
  • How to write a well-formatted and relevant personal statement.

McBurney Sections 37 - 49:
You will learn:
  • What backmasking is and how it serves as a rival explanation for satanic messages in music.
  • Why SELF-HELP books should NOT serve as a substitute for academic psychology textbooks and journal articles!
  • Psychology is a science because many psychological processes follow the same laws in every person.
  • The difference between biorhythms and biological rhythms (why biorhythm theory is considered a pseudoscience).
  • That even biological and psychological processes have variability.
  • Two reasons astrology is considered a pseudoscience (importance of progression and making connections to other sciences)
  • Human behavior is the result of too many variables to predict with accuracy who will and who will not commit certain behaviors.
  • What the base rate fallacy is and how it can account for our tendency to put more weight on single cases rather than aggregate statistics.
  • That science deals with questions that are answerable.
  • What the availability heuristic is and how it can explain why we tend to overestimate some events.
  • What the Fundamental Attribution Error is and how awareness of it can make you seem more liberal.
  • How some behaviors are so complicated that psychological explanations of them seem to contradict one another.
  • What the naturalistic fallacy is and how it can explain why we tend to incorrectly assume that when a theory predicts a behavior that also means that it justifies that behavior.
  • That we sometimes are not conscious of the causes of behavior.
Kuther Chapter 10: Getting into Grad School
Personal Statements Section

Admissions Essays (Personal Statements):
• Often most difficult part of application, because...
  – Must tailor each to the specific program and
  – Task is ambiguous, yet very important!

• Helps the committee narrow down the pool of applicants - your chance to stand out!

• Provides info about your...
  – Ability to write and to persuade
  – Interests, career aspirations, and values

Personal Statement Topics
• Most programs give 1 or 2 questions to answer...
  – Careers Plans?
  – General Interest areas?
  – Research Experience?
  – Academic Objectives?
  – Clinical or other field experience?
  – Academic background and achievements?
  – Personal?
    • Anything in background that is relevant. How have your life experiences led to an interest in psychology?
    • Personal and Professional development?
    • Describe values and approach to life

Personal Statements: Rules for Length and Content
1. Two single-spaced pages - must express yourself effectively and succinctly.
2. Attention to detail is critical - no spelling or grammatical errors!!
3. Do NOT discuss your own mental health, experiences with therapy, or heartaches!!
4. DO use concrete examples.
5. Should have at least four components: (a) previous research experience, (b) research interests, (c) relevant experience, and (d) career goals.

   a. Research Experience and Interests
      • Discuss the details of your research experience
        – Who supervised the work?
        – Was it part of a course requirement, class credit, or independent study?
        – Purpose of the research?
        – What was your role?
        – Any papers or presentations that resulted from the work?
        – How has your attitude changed as the result of the experience?

   b. Interests: What areas of psychology interest you now?
      • Identify faculty whose research interests you and tailor your personal statement by
explaining what interests you about that faculty member’s work.

c. Relevant Experience
   • Internship experiences
   • Volunteer experiences

d. Career Goals
   • Explain what you would like to do after obtaining your degree.
   • Illustrate how the program will help you prepare for this career.
   • Avoid personal, emotional self-disclosures!!

Last pieces of advice about Personal Statements:
   • Present yourself as a motivated, positive, upbeat person.
   • Explain how your attitudes, values, and personal qualities have influenced your academic record and accomplishments.
   • Emphasize how your personal qualities and achievements will help you succeed in grad school.
   • Avoid redundancy!
Section 37: Can we hear satanic messages in music that is played backwards?

**Principle:** We test hypotheses NOT by trying to confirm them but by comparing them to rival explanations.

Similar to the importance of finding **disconfirming evidence**.

Rival explanation to Satanic Messages:
- **Backmasking** = hear meaningful words in anything that is played backwards, because our brains try to make sense out of it!
- Also we hear things when we are given a “suggestion.”

Section 38: I found this great self-help book!

**Principle:** Nature is typically more complicated than any one theory can account for.

- **Beware** of using SELF-HELP books as a substitute for academic psychology textbooks and journal articles!
- Psychology self-help books are generally:
  1. unscientific,
  2. offer a **much too simplistic explanation** of behavior, and
  3. contradict one another

Section 39: How can psychology be a science when everyone is unique?

**Principle:** Science studies things that individuals have in common.

- Although most of us are genetically unique (except for twins), many psychological processes follow the same laws in every person.

Section 40: How do biorhythms work?

**Principle:** The processes that control human behavior are subject to variability

*Biological rhythm* = human behavior is controlled by three cycles; (1) 23-day masculine, (2) 28-day feminine, and (3) 31-day intellectual cycle.

- **Biorhythm theory** is pseudoscience because it is (1) based on astrology and (2) there is no evidence to support it.

Biorhythm is not **biological rhythm**, which does exist (sleep cycles, menstrual cycles, circadian rhythm).

But even biological and psychological processes have variability (e.g. some menstrual cycles are longer)

Section 41: What about Astrology?

**Principle:** If a branch of science does not make theoretical connections with the rest of science, it is almost certainly a pseudoscience.

Astrology is a pseudoscience because...

1. Science progresses yet Astrology has remained unchanged for thousands of years.
2. Science makes connections with other branches yet Astrology does not.
Section 42: Why can’t psychologists predict who will commit a violent act?  
**Principle:** *Prediction is often probabilistic.*

Human behavior is the result of too many variables to predict with accuracy who will and who will not commit certain behaviors.

Section 43: My mother went to a psychologist who was no help at all!  
**Principle:** *People place too much weight on isolated cases and not enough on aggregate statistics.*  
*This tendency is known as the base rate fallacy.*

Reason why we believe a friend’s opinion more than a consumer report.

Consider the following demo...

**Base Rate Fallacy DEMO:**

**Answer the following Easy Question**

Tom, a randomly chosen person, likes poetry. What is more likely to be his profession?  

- a) Truck driver?  
- b) Latin professor?

If you are like most people, you answered B - Latin Professor  

- Because you reasoned that Latin professors are more likely to enjoy poetry than truck drivers  
- That is, poetry liking is more “representative” of Latin professors

BUT answer B is wrong! Correct Answer = A. truck drivers

WHY? We ignore the base rate of truck drivers

Statistically there are many, many more truck drivers in the world than there are Latin Professors...

So even if only 5% of truck drivers liked poetry that would be many more people than if all Latin Professors liked poetry!!

Section 44: Why do psychologists avoid the important questions?  
**Principle:** *Science deals with questions that are answerable.*

It’s as simple as that!

Section 45: Why are so many criminals let off on the basis of insanity?  
**Principle:** *We develop beliefs about the relative frequency of events based on their relevant salience.*

This is called the availability heuristic = things seem like they occur more frequently because of how salient or how memorable they are
Availability Heuristic DEMO

**Answer the following Easy Questions...**

1. What is more common?
   - Death by homicide?
   - Death diabetes?

2. What is more common?
   - Words that begin with “k”?
   - Words that have “k” as the 3rd letter?

Like most people, you probably answered...
- “death by homicide” and
- “words that begin with letter K”

But this is wrong...
- actually more deaths by diabetes and more words where K is the 3rd letter

**WHY do we tend to answer incorrectly?**
- We rely on the number of easily recalled instances to determine the frequency of some event.
- Easier to recall stories of homicide deaths (compared to diabetes deaths), and
- Easier to recall words that begin with letter k (compared to words with k as 3rd letter).

**Section 46: Why are psychologists so liberal?**
**Principle:** The fundamental attribution error leads people to underestimate the importance of situations in determining behavior.

Psychologists tend to me more aware of the **Fundamental Attribution Error** = tendency to attribute the causes of one’s behavior to some internal, stable personality characteristic instead of the external situation.

Why people jump to conclusions and consider bad behavior a personality flaw, instead of a situation where the person may just be having a bad day.

**Section 47: Psychological explanations often contradict common sense.**
**Principle:** Most problems have a simple answer that is obvious but wrong, and complicated answer that is counterintuitive but correct.

Some behaviors are complicated.

For example = under some conditions expressing aggression is cathartic, and under other conditions it increases aggression
Section 48: I can’t buy Evolutionary Psychology because it justifies polygamy

**Principle:** To draw a value judgment from scientific theory or data is to commit the naturalistic fallacy, that is, to confuse “is” with “ought.”

- Key assumption of evolutionary psychology is that behavior that increases chance of survival is passed on to next generation

Section 49: I can’t buy Evolutionary Psychology because most of the time we are not trying to pass on our own genes

**Principle:** Causes of behavior do not always operate at the level of consciousness.