# INDIAN SCHOOL MUSCAT

## Senior Section

## Department of Commerce and Humanities

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**Environmental psychology** deals with various psychological issues pertaining to the human-environment interaction in a very broad sense of the term,

**Environment** refers to everything that surrounds us, including the physical, social, work and cultural environment. In general, it includes all the forces outside human beings to which they respond in some way.

**Ecology** is the study of the relationships between living things and their environment.

In this context, a distinction can be made between **natural environment** (that part of nature which remains untouched by human hand) and **built environment** (created by human beings within the natural environment).

- Creativity of the human mind as expressed in the work of architects, town planners and civil engineers.
- The sense of human control over the natural environment.
- The influence on the kind of social interaction that takes place in the designed environment.

**Human environment relationship views of Stokols**

The psychologist Stokols describes three approaches that may be adopted to describe the human-environment relationship:

- **Minimalist Perspective** assumes that the physical environment has minimal or negligible influence on human behaviour, health and well being and that the physical environment and human beings exist as parallel components.

- **Instrumental Perspective** suggests that physical environment exists mainly for use by human beings for their comfort and well being.
- **Spiritual Perspective** refers to the view of the environment as something to be respected and valued rather than exploited. It implies that human beings recognise the interdependent relationship between themselves and the environment (human beings will exist and be happy only as long a the environment is kept healthy and natural).

Noise, pollution, crowding and natural disasters are some examples of **environmental stressors** (stimuli or conditions in the environment that create stress for human beings).

**Noise** is any sound that is annoying or irritating, and felt to be unpleasant. Exposure to noise for a long period of time may lead to hearing loss. Apart from that, noise has negative effects on mental activity because it reduces concentration. Three characteristics of noise have been found to determine its effect on task performance: <u>intensity, predictability, controllability</u>.

- When the task being performed is a simple mental task, noise does not affect overall performance. In such situations, people adapt to the noise.
- If the task being performed is very interesting, the presence of noise does not affect performance.
- When the noise comes in intervals in an unpredictable way, it is experienced as more disturbing than if the noise is continuously present.
- When the task being performed is difficult or requires full concentration, then noise reduces the level of task performance.
- When tolerating or switching off the noise is within the control of the person, the number of errors in task performance decreases.
- In terms of emotional effects, noise above a certain level causes annoyance, and can also lead to sleep disturbance. These effects are also reduced if the noise is controllable, or is necessary as part of the person's occupation.

**Crowding** refers to a feeling of discomfort because there are too many people or things around us, giving us the experience of physical restriction, and sometimes lack of privacy. The experience of crowding has the following features:

- Feeling of discomfort
- Loss or decrease in privacy
- Negative view of the space around the person
- Feeling of loss of control over social interaction

Crowding is related to **density**, which is the number of persons within the available space. The effects of crowding and high density are as follows:

- Crowding and high density may lead to abnormal behaviour and aggression. Based on a study of rats, this was found to be true among humans as well. An increase in population has sometimes been found to be accompanied by an increase in violent crime.
- Crowding leads to lowered performance on difficult tasks that involve cognitive processes, and has adverse effects on memory and the emotional state.
- Children growing up in very crowded households show lower academic performance. They also show a weaker tendency to continue working on a task if they are unsuccessful at it, and experience greater conflict with their parents, and get less support from family members.
- The nature of social interaction determines the degree to which an individual will react to crowding.
- Individuals differ in the degree to which they show negative effects to crowding, and also in the nature of these reactions. Two kinds of tolerance can be mentioned:
  1. **Crowding tolerance** refers to the ability to mentally deal with a high density or crowded environment. People who are used to an environment containing more people around them develop more crowding tolerance than people who are used to only a few people around them.
  2. **Competition tolerance** is the ability to put up with a situation in which individuals would have to compete with many others for even basic resources, including physical space.
- **Personal space** is the comfortable physical space one generally likes to maintain around oneself, and this is affected by a high density environment. In a crowded context, there is a restriction on personal space, and this can also be a cause of negative reactions to crowding.

In social situations, humans like to maintain a certain physical distance from the person with whom they are interacting, and this is called **interpersonal physical distance**. It is part of a broader concept of personal space. Personal space can vary between people, between situations and settings and between cultures. Edward Hall mentioned four kinds of interpersonal physical distance, depending on the situation.

Intimate Distance – up to 18 inches (very close friend or relative)
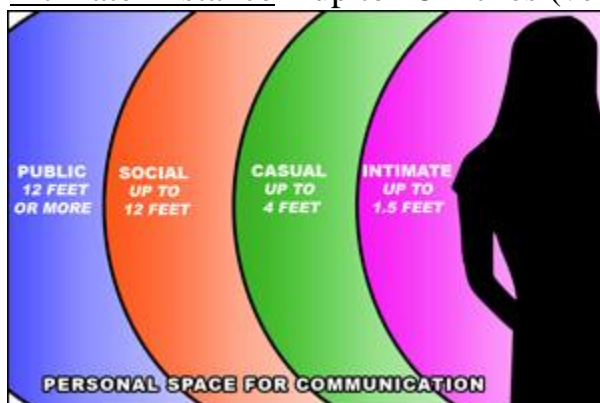
Personal Distance – 18 inches to 4 feet (friend, relative, someone at work)

Social Distance – 4 to 10 feet (interaction is formal, not close)

Public Distance – 10 feet or more

These distances are maintained voluntarily, keeping in mind the comfort experienced by the persons involved in the interaction.

The concept of personal space is important for the following reasons:

- It explains many of the negative effects of crowding as an environmental stressor.
- It tells us about social relationships.
- It gives us some idea about how physical space can be modified in order to reduce stress or discomfort in social situations, or to make social interaction more enjoyable and fruitful.

**Natural Disasters** are stressful experiences that are the consequence of disturbances in the natural environment. However, wars and epidemics are human made events, although their effects can also be as severe as those of natural disasters. These events are called <u>disasters</u> because they cannot be prevented and usually come without any warning, resulting in immense damage to human lives and property.

**Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder** is a severe psychological problem that results from traumatic events such as natural disorders. This disorder has the following features:

- <u>Immediate reaction</u> to disaster is commonly one of disorientation. People take some time to understand the full meaning of what the disaster has done to them, and may actually deny that something terrible has happened.
- <u>Physical reactions</u> such as bodily exhaustion even without physical activity, difficulty in sleeping, change in eating pattern, increased heartbeat and blood pressure can be found among victims of PTSD.
- <u>Emotional reactions</u> such as grief, fear, irritability, anger, helplessness, hopelessness, depression, etc are common.
- <u>Cognitive reactions</u> such as worry, difficulty in concentration, reduced span of attention, vivid memories of the event, etc also occur.
- <u>Social reactions</u> such as withdrawal from others, conflict, etc occur. In the midst of severe emotional reactions to stress, some survivors may actually help in the healing process. Having been through the experience, these persons may develop a positive outlook on life and with empathy, pass this attitude to other survivors.

In general, intensity of the reaction is affected by:

- Severity of disaster and the loss incurred
- Individual's general coping ability
- Other stressful experiences before the disaster

Ways to minimise natural disaster's devastating consequences:

- Warnings
- Safety measures – Tips are given beforehand, as events may come too suddenly for people to be warned.

- Treatment of psychological disorders – This includes self-help approaches as well as professional treatment. The very first step involves <u>providing material relief</u> in the form of food, clothing, etc. <u>Counselling</u> at the individual and group level is the next step, and can take many forms. According to experts who deal with PTSD, one of the key attitudes to be developed in the survivors is that of self-efficacy (the belief that the person can do it). <u>Psychiatric help</u> may be needed for those showing extreme stress reactions. Finally, <u>rehabilitation</u> in the form of employment and a gradual return to the normal routine should be undertaken, and at some stage, <u>follow-up</u> of the victims and survivors is also needed in order ensure that they have recovered from their experience.

**Pro-environmental behaviour** includes both actions that are meant to protect the environment from problems, and to promote a healthy environment. Some of the actions to protect the environment from pollution are:

- Reducing air pollution
- Reducing noise pollution
- Managing disposal of garbage sensibly (separation of biodegradable garbage from non-biodegradable waste)
- Planting trees and ensuring their care
- Saying no to plastics in any form
- Reducing the non-biodegradable packaging of consumer goods
- Laws related to construction that violate optimal environmental design

Experts define poverty mainly in economic terms, and measure it in terms of income, nutrition, and the amount spent on basic necessities of life. Some other indicators are also used, such as physical health and literacy. From the socio-psychological point of view, **poverty** is a condition in which there is a lack of necessities of life in the context of unequal distribution of wealth in society. A sense of deprivation and social disadvantage are additional features of poverty.

| Deprivation | Poverty |
|---|---|
| • **Deprivation** refers to the state in which a person feels that s/he has lost something valuable, and is not getting what s/he deserves. | • **Poverty** refers to an actual shortage of the resources necessary for living, and thus can be objectively defined. |

A poor person may experience deprivation, but a deprived person does not necessarily have to be poor.

Both poverty and deprivation are linked to **social disadvantage**, a condition because of which some sections of society are not allowed to enjoy the same privileges as the rest of society.

Social disadvantage because of caste and poverty has created the problem of discrimination. **Discrimination** refers to the behaviour that makes a distinction between the rich and the poor, favoring the rich and the advantaged over the poor and the disadvantaged. This distinction can be seen in matters of social interaction, education and employment.

Poverty and discrimination are related in such a way that discrimination becomes both a cause and a consequence of poverty.

**Psychological characteristics and effects of poverty and deprivation:**

- In terms of motivation, the poor have low aspirations and low achievement motivation, and high need for dependence. They explain their successes in terms of luck or fate rather than ability or hard work.
- In terms of personality, the poor have low self-esteem, are high on anxiety and introversion, and dwell on the immediate present rather than being future oriented. They prefer smaller immediate rewards to larger rewards in the long run, because in their perception, the future is too uncertain.
- In terms of social behaviour, they have an attitude of resentment towards the rest of society.
- Their intellectual functioning and performance on tasks is lower compared to those who are less deprived. The effect of deprivation is because the nature of the environment in which the children grow up makes a difference in their cognitive development, and this is reflected in cognitive task performance.
- The poor are more likely to suffer from specific mental illnesses. It has been suggested that depression may be a mental disorder largely of the poor. The poor experience a sense of hopelessness and a loss of identity, as though they do not belong to society. As a result, they also suffer from emotional and adjustment problems.

**Points of view of the causes of poverty:**

- The poor themselves are responsible for their poverty – The poor lack the ability and motivation to put in effort, and make use of available opportunities. In general, such a view about the poor is rather negative, and does not help.
- It is not the individual, but a belief system that causes poverty – This belief system called the **culture of poverty** convinces the person that s/he will continue to remain poor, and the belief is carried over from one generation of poor to the next.
- Economic, social and political factors together account for poverty – Because of discrimination, certain sections of society are denied the opportunities needed for

the basic necessities of life. The economic system is made to grow in a disproportionate way through social and political exploitation.

- The geographic region in which one lives is said to be a significant cause of poverty
- Poverty cycle – Poverty begets poverty. The resulting lowered motivational level only makes the situation worse; the cycle starts and continues again.

**Aggression** refers to any behaviour by one person/persons that is intended to cause harm to another person/persons.

**Violence** is forceful destructive behaviour towards another person or object.

Some psychologists distinguish aggression from violence by pointing out that aggressive behaviour involves the intention to harm or injure another person, whereas violence may or may not have such an intention.

| Instrumental Aggression | Hostile Aggression |
|---|---|
| • In **instrumental aggression**, the act of aggression is meant to obtain a certain goal or object. | • **Hostile aggression** is that which is shown as an expression of anger towards the target, whith the intention of harming her/him, even if the aggressor does not wish to obtain anything from the victim. |

**Causes of aggression:**

- Inborn tendency – Aggressiveness is an inborn tendency among human beings. Biologically, this inborn tendency may be meant for self-defence.
- Physiological mechanisms – It could be indirectly triggered by physiological mechanisms, especially by the activation of certain parts of the brain that play a role in emotional experience. A general physiological state of arousal might often be expressed in the form of aggression.
- Child-rearing – The way an individual is brought up often influences her/his aggressiveness. This could be because the parent has set an example of aggressive behaviour, which the child imitates. It could also be because physical punishment makes the child angry and resentful; as the child grows, s/he expresses this anger through aggressive behaviour.
- Frustration – Aggression is an expression and consequence of frustration (an emotional state that arises when a person is prevented from reaching a goal or

attaining an object). In one experiment conducted to examine the effects of frustration, children were prevented from getting certain toys that were visible through a screen, and as a result, these children were found to be more destructive in play than those children who were allowed access to toys.

John Dollard, an American psychologist, conducted research specifically to examine the **frustration-aggression theory** that proposes that frustration leads to aggression. This found that such aggression was often shown towards a weaker person, who was unlikely or unable to react to the aggression, and this phenomenon is called **displacement**.

Frustration is not the only or major cause of aggression. Observations showed that being frustrated does not necessarily make a person aggressive and many other situational factors lead to aggression, such as:

- Learning – Aggression is largely the result of learning rather than an expression of an inborn tendency, and learning of this aggression can take place in more than one mode. Individuals may exhibit aggression because they have found it rewarding, and this would be a case of learning through direct reinforcement. Individuals also learn to be aggressive by observing others showing aggression, and this is known as modelling.
- Observing an aggressive model – Albert Bandura and his collaborators show the role of modelling in learning aggression, such as children being influenced by violence on TV.
- Anger provoking action by others – Some researchers have found that observing violence leads to a greater likelihood of aggression on the part of the observer only if weapons of aggression (stick, pistol, knife, etc.) are available.
- Personality factors – Aggressiveness is also a personal quality. People who have very low self-esteem and feel insecure may behave aggressively in order to boost their ego, and people with very high self-esteem may also show aggression as they feel that others do not place them at the high level at which they have placed themselves.
- Cultural factors – The culture in which one grows up can teach its members to be aggressive or not by encouraging and praising aggressive behaviour.

**Ways of curtailing aggression:**

- Parents and teachers should be especially careful not to encourage or reward aggression in any form. The use of punishment to bring about discipline should not be done.
- Opportunities to observe and imitate the behaviour of aggressive models should be reduced. Portraying aggression as heroic behaviour should be avoided.
- Poverty and social injustice may be a prominent cause of aggression as they can cause frustration in certain sections of society. Implementing social justice and

equality in society may help in reducing frustration levels and thereby curb aggressive tendencies to an extent.

- It is important to inculcate a positive attitude towards peace at the level of the community or society.

Research shows that watching violence may actually reduce the natural aggressive tendency of the viewers as what is bottled up gets and outlet and thus cleans the system. This process is known as **catharsis**.

In the case of adults as well as children, a consumerist attitude has developed and this is due to television watching.