

Chapter 1

Seeing the Purpose of Psychology

In This Chapter

- ▶ Defining psychology
 - ▶ Understanding how people work
 - ▶ Figuring out how psychology can help
-

Most people I know have a certain idea in mind when they think about psychology.

I'm a psychologist. But what's that? Someone who knows and studies psychology, but is that all there is to it? When I get together with family and friends during the holidays, it seems like they still don't know exactly what I do for a living.

Some of my patients have said, "All you do is talk. Can't you prescribe some medicine for me?" Still others grant me seemingly supernatural powers of knowledge and healing. I wrote this book to clear up some misconceptions about psychology.

What Is Psychology?

What are some of the ideas that come to mind when people think about the topic of psychology? It depends on whom you ask. Sometimes, I imagine myself as a guest on a television talk show. I'm bombarded by questions from the audience that I can't answer. My heart starts to pound. I begin to sweat. I start to stand up so that I can run off the set, but then something comes to me that keeps me in my seat. I imagine asking the people in the audience what they think psychology is and why they think a psychologist can answer questions about psychology.



Whys, hows, and whats

Before I provide a definition of psychology, I want you to take a few minutes to jot down some of your ideas on what psychology is.

Why did this book catch your eye?

Are you looking for answers? Looking for advice?

What's the question you're asking here?

"Why do people do what they do?" is the question that lies beneath many of the other questions people ask psychologists. Whether you're a professional psychologist, a researcher, or a layperson, this one simple question seems to be the root issue.

Here are some examples of the motivating questions that drive the discipline of psychology:

- ✓ Why did that shooting happen?
- ✓ Why can't I stop feeling sad?
- ✓ Why did she break up with me?
- ✓ Why are people so mean?

Basically, psychology is a branch of knowledge that focuses on *people*, either as individuals or in groups.

Other fundamental questions of psychology center on the "how" of things:

- ✓ How can I get excited about my marriage again?
- ✓ How can I get my 2-year-old to stop throwing tantrums?
- ✓ How does the mind work?

Still other questions deal with the "whats":

- ✓ What are emotions?
- ✓ What is mental illness?
- ✓ What is intelligence?

These why, how, and what questions comprise the intellectual and philosophical core of psychology.

Therefore, *psychology* can be defined as the *scientific study of human behavior and mental processes*. Psychology attempts to uncover what people do along with why and how they do it.

Building a person

When I try to imagine all the reasons that people do what they do and figure out how various behaviors and mental processes come to pass, I often run with a “mad-scientist” approach. I’ve always thought that one of the best ways to answer the what and why and how questions would be to build a person. Well, not actually build one like Dr. Frankenstein did — out of parts and brains and electricity — but to create a blueprint of a person’s mind and behavior.

In therapy, when people try to explain a particular behavior or situation to me, I often say, “Can you make it happen, now? Can you show me?” For example, a parent may be telling me how his child hits him when he tells the child to do something. And I’ll say, “Show me. Make it happen.” The most common response is a puzzled or disturbed look on the parent’s face.

The point is, if they can cause it to happen, then they can un-cause it to happen, too. And that means they understand why and how it’s happening. This is a type of reverse psychological engineering for figuring out the “why” and “how” of human behavior.

I envision psychology reaching a pinnacle when it can list all the ingredients of the human mind and all the determinants of behavior. Maybe the field can figure it all out through that reverse engineering process mentioned earlier. Or, at the very least, maybe psychology will figure out people, and all the information that experts gather can be stored or formulated into an *algorithm* for making people that, one day, a super-intelligent robotic life form can utilize to re-create the human species thousands of years after it becomes extinct. I did say mad scientist, right?

Yes, this is the kind of blueprint or overlay I use to understand what psychology is: What are the ingredients of a person — mind, thoughts, emotions, perceptions, dreams, fears, personality, and brain — and what is the purpose of each ingredient? I’m not alone. Many psychologists engage in reverse engineering of the mind and behavior by looking at all the parts and how they work together to create . . . well, you.

Finding the function

A first principle of my mad-scientist vision of psychology is that building a human requires you to know what the person’s function is. After all, engineers don’t build things without knowing what they’re supposed to do. Only with a purpose in mind can you know what to build and what features and materials need to be considered.

So, what’s the function — the purpose — of a human being?

Like all other carbon-based living organisms on planet Earth, human beings are “staying alive” machines. (Admit it; you instantly thought of the Bee Gees, didn’t you, or John Travolta in that white bell-bottom suit?) I’m not saying there is no meaning to life. Quite the contrary; I’m saying that the function of life is to be alive, to stay alive, and to perpetuate life. What’s the meaning of it all? Wrong book; try *Philosophy For Dummies* or *Religion For Dummies*.

The field of psychology concerns itself with the study of the “how” of life — the behavior and mental processes of being alive, staying alive, and perpetuating life.

Checking the Parts List

From a psychological standpoint, what does the human machine need in order to fulfill its function of existing, staying alive, and perpetuating? Well, if you’ve ever put together a do-it-yourself piece of furniture, you know that the instructions usually start out with a parts list.

Psychological science has already put together quite an impressive psychological parts list:

✓ **Bodies** (and all the subparts — see Chapter 3 for more)

- Brains
- Hearts
- Hormones
- Genes
- Motor skills

✓ **Minds** (and all the subparts — see Chapters 4–8)

- Consciousness
- Sensations and perceptions, including vision, hearing, taste, smell, touch, balance, and pain
- Thinking, which manages attending, remembering, forming concepts, problem solving, deciding, and intelligence
- Communicating, including verbal and nonverbal expressions such as body language, gestures, speech, and language
- Motivations
- Emotions

✓ **Personality** (see Chapter 9)

- ✓ **Gender and sexuality** (see the free online article “Exploring Human Differences: Culture, Gender, and Sexuality” at www.dummies.com/extras/psychology)
- ✓ **Social skills and relationship skills** (see Chapters 10 and 11)

Just like putting together that desk from IKEA seemed a lot easier on paper than it actually turned out to be, assembling this list of psychological parts is daunting as well. Psychologists are still trying to understand each component in relative isolation and figure out how they all fit together. It's the crux of what remains a formidable task in developing a comprehensive human science.

Troubleshooting

Imagine that I've assembled my human being, switched it on, and let it loose to go about its primary function of surviving. I think I've equipped it with all it needs in order to survive.

But then it happens — change. That's right, something unexpected happens, and my human begins floundering, struggling, and verging on failing to achieve its primary function. How could I have forgotten that the world is not a static place?

My creation is dealing with the environment in ways that I should have anticipated. So I go back to the drawing board to add the following functions and abilities (yep, more parts):

- ✓ **Learning:** Ability to learn from the environment
- ✓ **Context:** Ability to grow and develop in response to the environment
- ✓ **Adaption:** Ability to cope with change, stress, and illness

Humans need parts and procedures.

Whew, this is getting complicated.

Finding Professional Help

Often, a person's parts are all assembled, and he's learning, growing, adapting, and adjusting to the best of his individual ability — but something's “off” or he's just not functioning properly. This is where physicians, psychotherapists, counselors, social workers, educators, and consultants enter the picture.

The tools and procedures that health care providers use to diagnose, fix, and maintain people include the following and other areas of research and practice:

- ✓ **Diagnostics:** Among the specialties of diagnostics are abnormal psychology (covered in Chapter 13) and psychological assessment and testing (see Chapter 14).
- ✓ **Biomedical therapies:** Treatment for various psychological conditions may include medication and/or physiological therapies (see Chapter 3).
- ✓ **Psychological therapy and intervention:** Psychoanalysis, cognitive-behavioral therapy, and humanistic therapies (see Chapters 15–18).
- ✓ **Applied psychology:** Using psychological science to solve a wide range of human problems and issues. (See the free online article “Applying Psychology for a Better World” at www.dummies.com/extras/psychology.)

Putting It into Practice

Psychology is the scientific study of human behavior and mental processes. In case you were wondering (and worried), I am not engaged in an actual “build a human” project. But I’d have a very solid foundation and a good blueprint to get started if I ever decided to try. Each of a person’s parts, processes, and sources of help represents a chapter or section of *Psychology For Dummies*, 2nd Edition.

Psychology began as a type of philosophy, a mostly subjective, speculative, and theoretical way of thinking about human beings. But, as a result of the enormous contributions of such people as William James, Wilhem Wundt, Edward Thorndike, B. F. Skinner, Albert Bandura, Jean Piaget, Phillip Zimbardo, Robert Sternberg, Albert Ellis, and many, many others, it has matured over the last 100 years into an objective science. Psychology’s experimentation methods and statistical analyses continue to grow increasingly sophisticated.

Psychology has evolved from a study of intangible thought and consciousness to the study of material subject matter — as in brains and test scores — thanks to modern technological advances such as psychological testing instruments, EEG, and MRI.

This fascinating field continues to mature as its practitioners become more sophisticated in their understanding of how the environment and human differences (such as culture and ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation) impact the mind and behavior.