

Chapter One

Why Major in Psychology?

Introduction

Psychology is a fascinating and diverse field of study. It attracts students with varied backgrounds, interests, and abilities, all of whom are hoping that psychology will be a good fit for them. In addition to simply pursuing topics that they find compelling, these students stand to benefit from devoting themselves to the study of such a broad field. Psychology's breadth is what makes it possible for students to acquire a wide range of knowledge and skills that are applicable to a variety of careers. In other words, psychology offers many different things to many different types of individuals. Although this is a strength of the field, it also can make it difficult to determine if psychology is the *best* fit for you. Consider for a moment three students, all undergraduates who have come to think that majoring in psychology is what is best for them.

Valerie

Valerie is 19 years old and always knew she would go to college. Since middle school she had planned to become a teacher, so she first chose education as her major. After taking several introductory courses and talking with faculty members in the education department, Valerie decided that teaching was not for her. She next considered majoring in nursing, but the admission standards for local nursing programs are highly competitive. Valerie feared that the grades she earned in several courses required by nursing programs

would make her acceptance unlikely. One day last semester, Valerie's roommate described an interesting demonstration her psychology professor had presented in class. This reminded Valerie of her interest in psychology in high school, and she decided to take a course to see what psychology was like at the college level. Valerie enjoyed the course and performed well. As a result, she decided to change her major to psychology. When she recently mentioned the change to her parents, they were not especially positive. They asked probing questions about what she could do with a psychology degree and how her career options would compare to those of education or nursing majors. Valerie was unsure how to answer their questions. She had not thought much about what she can or will do with her degree. But, she figures that if so many other people major in psychology, there must be employment options out there.

Ajay

Ajay is 37 years old and has attended college at several points in the past at two different institutions. Most recently he stopped attending after his first child was born. Between working full-time and raising children, he was unsure if he would ever return to school to complete his degree. Now that Ajay's children are older and his financial status is more secure, he has decided to return to college part-time in order to get back into the academic routine. Ever since he was young, Ajay has had a desire to become a clinical psychologist. He was involved in family therapy as a child and individual therapy as an adolescent. He has fond memories of the psychologists he interacted with and the benefits of these treatments. His interests have prompted him to read psychological theory and some of the latest research in the field. Now that he is returning to school again, Ajay has committed himself to taking his education seriously and staying focused on his career goal. He knows meeting this goal will require completing a doctoral degree. Although Ajay is excited to begin moving forward along this path, he is also concerned that the road ahead seems long.

Katrina

Katrina is 25 years old. She began college 2 years ago after working for several years in her family's business. Katrina's first major was computer science, an area of interest for her since high school. Her teachers, family, and friends encouraged her to pursue this major given her talents and technological skills. She enjoyed the courses at first but later realized that she did not feel passionate about the topics or the prospects of future careers in

the field. Due to her growing apathy, and her working 30–40 hours a week, Katrina's grades suffered. Then she took a psychology course and started a dialogue about her interests with the professor. As a result, Katrina decided to switch majors to psychology. Since that time she has invested herself in her coursework and excelled academically. After serving as a research assistant in one of her professor's labs over the past year, Katrina is now planning to pursue a research career in cognitive psychology. She intends to merge her computer science skills with her developing interest in human memory. Although changing majors extended her graduation date for another year, Katrina now knows exactly what it is she wants to do in her career and has worked diligently to learn about the field, improve her academic skills, and gain valuable experience.

Valerie, Ajay, and Katrina represent typical undergraduate psychology majors. Many of you will identify with one or more aspects of their histories and experiences. Some of you may not see parts of yourself in these particular students, but there are still several things you all have in common. Each of you has decided to major in psychology, or is seriously considering it, as a result of intertwining experiences and life circumstances. Each of you has found something intrinsically interesting within the field. And each of you is hoping that this major will be the one that satisfies your interests and allows you to accomplish your goals. In essence, each of you hopes that you have found a home in psychology.

As professors of psychology, we have taught, advised, supervised, and mentored thousands of undergraduate students in all areas of their academic and career pursuits. Among them have been students like Valerie, Ajay, and Katrina. Although every student's context is somewhat unique, chances are we have also worked with students who have a lot in common with you. Our focus is on helping these students succeed in the ways that best match their goals, and we find this work to be incredibly rewarding. Perhaps the least satisfying aspect of this work is encountering students who could have benefited significantly from having key questions answered and guidance provided when they were first navigating the psychology major. Instead, these students find themselves playing catch-up, and they often feel confused and frustrated about their education and potential careers. Our focus on student success, coupled with our awareness of students' needs for information and guidance, prompted us to write this book. It is our hope that you find elements of it informative and instructive in pursuing your academic and career goals.

In this opening chapter, we first offer some brief suggestions on how to use the book effectively. The remainder of the chapter considers a question that may be looming large in many of your minds – why psychology?

Regardless of whether you have already firmly committed to the major or are still trying to make a decision, this section will help all students formulate and explore their specific interests in the field.

How to Use this Book

This book seeks to cover a range of issues relevant to psychology majors in a comprehensive manner. As a result, some chapters will likely appeal to you immediately because they address your current situation or pressing concerns (e.g., deciding if psychology is the right major, preparing a résumé, obtaining research experience). However, we want to encourage you not to neglect chapters that seem less relevant at this particular moment in your education. The information contained in such chapters will be helpful to you in the near future, and it may challenge your current thinking about how you are approaching your education or weighing the career options available to you. For example, those of you who are first- or second-year students may feel like the chapters on preparing for employment and graduate school address concerns that you will tackle in the distant future. You are partly correct in that the point at which you submit résumés and applications may be a few years away. But most of the steps and strategies that will allow you to succeed in these endeavors must be put into place right now. Many students applying to jobs and graduate schools wish they had prepared better, including taking important steps in their first and second years of college. Also, those of you who feel certain of your career interests should keep in mind that careers are selected for many reasons. But choosing not to pursue a certain area in the field simply because you know little about it might ultimately cheat you out of a rewarding career. By the same token, writing off graduate school because of a misconception you have about it, or abandoning psychology as a major because you believe you cannot work in your area of interest with a bachelor's degree, would be mistakes that are preventable only if you are well informed.

Why Major in Psychology?

Majoring in Psychology for What Psychology Is

One of the primary goals of this book is to have students who are majoring in psychology do so with a clearer sense of their specific interests in the discipline and how these interests will translate into career goals and plans. This would involve students majoring in psychology for reasons that have

to do with the discipline itself and how a program of study in this field will support their future endeavors. To facilitate this process, it is vital to first consider what psychology is.

Psychology is the scientific study of behavior and mental processes in both human and nonhuman animals. The field focuses on outward, easily observable behavior as well as more covert experiences and processes such as memory, attitudes, and emotions. Psychologists study typical and atypical behavior and mental processes at both the individual and group levels. Given this focus, psychologists often engage in both generating new research and applying research findings to real-world problems and situations. Some have careers that concentrate exclusively on either research or applied endeavors, but many psychologists are involved in both activities.

The field's scientific foundation leads many psychologists to gather new knowledge about behavior and mental processes. This knowledge is generated in systematic ways, typically building on previous knowledge in a steady march toward greater understanding. Psychologists generate questions about aspects of behavior, propose possible explanations, and design methods of collecting data to test their hypotheses and help answer their questions. This process leads to new questions and additional research.

The field's applied foundation means that many psychologists work to address problems in the functioning of behavior and mental processes. This work involves developing new techniques and tools for addressing problems, putting these interventions into practice, and evaluating their effectiveness. The applied endeavors of psychologists serve the needs of human and nonhuman animals while simultaneously generating new ideas and opportunities for research.

The mixture of research and applied endeavors is evidence that psychology is an incredibly diverse field. This diversity in part results from the field's focus on the broad topic of behavior and mental processes. In fact, psychologists who may appear to have little in common in terms of their day-to-day work still understand and operate within the basic foundations of the discipline. For example, consider the following three psychologists:

- Dr. Rivera is an industrial–organizational psychologist. She works for a large consulting firm that contracts with major, international businesses to provide services related to their workforce and the workplace. Dr. Rivera's specialty is employee selection and leadership. She travels extensively when training new clients on the implementation of her firm's techniques and software.
- Dr. Neal is an experimental psychologist who studies stress reactions, often by using nonhuman animals as a model for human behavior. She is a faculty member at a large state university where she teaches

undergraduate and graduate courses, supervises graduate students' research, and operates a research lab. Dr. Neal recently secured grant funding to conduct a new study on stress and caffeine tolerance.

- Dr. Janowitz is a school psychologist who works for two school districts in a rural county. He is assigned to two high schools, three middle schools, and four elementary schools. He works directly with students by conducting psychological evaluations, creating educational plans, coordinating mental health and academic services, and facilitating prevention programs on substance abuse.

The daily activities of these psychologists appear so diverse that you might believe they were trained in different fields of study. But closer examination reveals that each is engaged in the study of behavior and mental processes. It is also evident that the research and applied areas of the field are relevant to all three. Although only Dr. Neal appears to be actively conducting research, Dr. Rivera's and Dr. Janowitz's work is closely tied to the scientific aspects of the field. Both use assessment tools and techniques that are products of extensive research. In addition, both utilize research and statistical methods to gather and analyze data on the effectiveness of their work. Although Dr. Rivera and Dr. Janowitz are clearly involved in applied activities, Dr. Neal's research on stress has potential applications that she considers when writing about her work and attempting to secure funding. In addition, her involvement in the teaching and supervision of students is an applied endeavor. As these psychologists illustrate, the breadth of the psychology discipline provides room for people with diverse interests and talents to make contributions to the field.

Despite the commonalities among all psychologists, there are some stark differences in the specific focus of their work. Most psychologists specialize in a particular subfield of the discipline. They acquire this expertise in graduate school where training is focused on a narrow range of the field. In contrast to this specificity of training at the graduate level, training in psychology at the undergraduate level is broad in its attempt to provide students with a basic foundation. In fact, the objectives for student learning are similar across programs, as reflected in the guidelines for undergraduate majors provided by the American Psychological Association (APA; 2013). These guidelines emphasize knowledge of and capacity to effectively use:

- the major concepts, theories, themes, empirical findings, and applications in the field;
- scientific reasoning, psychological sources, research methods, and statistical analyses;

- ethical standards and socially responsible behavior;
- written, oral, and interpersonal communication; and
- applications of psychological content and skills (e.g., project management, teamwork, self-regulation) toward career development.

Undergraduate programs in psychology emphasize this core set of learning objectives in order to prepare students for the next phase of their careers. Students who graduate with this knowledge and skill set are prepared to move into a variety of careers or enter graduate school for specialized training.

Popularity of the Degree

For decades psychology has been among the most popular majors on college and university campuses. According to a report from the US Department of Education's National Center for Educational Statistics (2013), students earned 108,896 bachelor's degrees in psychology in the United States during the 2011–2012 academic year. The only major with more graduates was business administration (138,910). There are more students earning bachelor's degrees in psychology than in education (105,785), nursing (92,029), engineering (81,382), and communication (88,752). Clearly students are gravitating to the psychology major in large numbers. Odds are on your campus a substantial proportion of your peers are pursuing the psychology major. This popularity has some general advantages for you.

First, consider that when departments have large numbers of majors, institutions must provide adequate resources to facilitate the education of these students. As a psychology major, you may have access to resources (e.g., technology lab, advising center, tutoring) that students in smaller, less popular departments do not. Second, because psychology has attracted large numbers of undergraduate majors over time, the field has established a rich tradition of developing and researching effective ways to teach. In fact, psychology is often viewed as a leader among disciplines in teaching and providing a quality undergraduate education. This means that many of your psychology professors will be devoted to helping students succeed both within and outside of the classroom. Third, although the popularity of a major does not always closely follow the job market for its graduates, if a large portion of the 100,000+ yearly graduates were struggling to find employment, the popularity of psychology over time would likely decrease. Therefore, these graduates must be having reasonable success securing employment.

A Multipurpose Degree

Part of the popularity of psychology, and other similarly structured degrees, is that it can serve two basic purposes. Some psychology majors will use their degree to seek employment and perhaps begin their careers. These students are often described as pursuing a bachelor's degree that is liberal arts in nature. Others will use their degree to enter graduate school and complete additional training prior to beginning their careers. These students are often described as pursuing a bachelor's degree that is preprofessional in nature. Which of these two paths you choose is largely based on your career objectives and plans. Although students pursuing either liberal arts or preprofessional degrees typically fulfill the same curriculum requirements for graduation, they are on different trajectories. As a result, they should each be focused on gathering the types of knowledge, skills, and experiences that will be most beneficial to their particular path.

The preprofessional degree path is discussed in greater detail in later chapters, but for now it is important to understand that all careers as psychologists require extensive graduate education and training. The bachelor's degree alone does not prepare you to work as a psychologist. Instead it can prepare you to seek certain types of graduate education, many of which are covered in detail in the chapters on the various careers in the field. The liberal arts degree path is also discussed in depth in a subsequent chapter. In the meantime, keep in mind that if you plan on pursuing employment or beginning your career after earning your bachelor's degree in psychology, this degree will not equip you with a specialized set of skills in the same way that a degree in nursing, engineering, education, accounting, or computer science would. As a liberal arts degree, your degree in psychology will provide you with general knowledge about the field as well as skills necessary to engage in lifelong learning (e.g., critical thinking, information gathering, and analysis).

Majoring in Psychology for Reasons Unrelated to Psychology

The diversity and flexibility of psychology as a field of study helps explain part of its enormous popularity as an undergraduate major. But if you talk to your peers about their reasons for majoring in psychology, you will likely hear a wide array of experiences and explanations. Some of these reasons will pertain to the nature of the psychology discipline and what it has to offer students. However, many of your peers, and perhaps even you, will give reasons that are unrelated to psychology as a field of study. In our experience, students repeatedly cite three such reasons as motivating factors in their interest in psychology.

The “path of least resistance” reason. Students sometimes choose to major in psychology because they believe it provides a more favorable route to earning a bachelor’s degree compared to other majors. For example, some students acknowledge that a factor in their selection of the major was that the psychology curriculum at their institution does not require a course they wanted to avoid (e.g., foreign language, higher-level math, natural science). Other students assert that they simply need to finish a bachelor’s degree in something in order to obtain a job or advance in their current position. They have determined that the focus of their degree will not impact their career plans and that they simply need a degree in something. Still other students openly acknowledge that they selected psychology because they perceived it to be an easier or more popular path compared to majors they have already unsuccessfully attempted.

Some of you may have originally come to psychology because it seemed like the path of least resistance. Our purpose here is not to make you feel ashamed. Instead, we want you to aggressively pursue the notion that your major can be something far more than the quickest or easiest path. Whatever your ultimate career plans, major in psychology with clear objectives and understand how the major will help you accomplish your goals.

The “one course and I was sold” reason. Students often choose to major in psychology because they had a positive experience in their first psychology course (Rajecki, Williams, Appleby, Jeschke, & Johnson, 2005). Many claim that the material was so interesting that they simply felt this was the major for them. Others assert that the concepts in their first course came so easily to them that psychology just seemed like common sense. Still others note that they tried alternative majors first, but upon taking one psychology course they knew what they wanted to do. Typically these students are referring to courses such as Introductory Psychology or perhaps Advanced Placement Psychology in high school. These courses provide a broad overview of the field as a whole. In highlighting major points and themes, they often address the most interesting and compelling topics and research. The fact that students have positive learning experiences in these courses is great news, but it is quite a common experience. Their enjoyment of this experience can be the result of many factors such as having excellent teachers, being motivated to study, earning a good grade, and being interested in the subject matter. None of these factors alone, especially in the context of a single, brief course, should be a deciding factor in determining one’s major and future career. Consider for a moment what would have happened had these same students taken a different section of the course with a less engaging teacher or perhaps enrolled in an equally compelling introductory

course in another major? Could the entire fate of their college and professional lives have been altered by this slightly different experience? If they based the selection of their major and career on a single course, then the answer is yes.

As concerning as this sounds, do not be alarmed if you are currently a psychology major in large part because of a positive experience in an introductory course. The fact that you are excited about some aspect of psychology is great, and it will be important to preserve this passion and follow your interests. But you still need to determine whether the major is right for you and whether your career objectives are in line with what the degree offers.

The “I’m destined to be a helper” reason. A large proportion of students chose psychology as their major because they “want to help people” or have “always been fascinated by human behavior.” This is a significant factor identified by first-year and senior psychology majors alike (Stewart, Hill, Stewart, Bimler, & Kirkland, 2005). By claiming they want to help others, these students are often referring to career goals that have to do with providing mental health services to patients. When pressed for additional details, many of these students assert that they have always had a talent for listening to or “reading” people and helping them with their problems. For example, some students state that they are the one in their family or circle of friends who is the most compassionate and supportive when others are in need, and that the people around them routinely seek out their advice and comfort. These are certainly worthy goals and important personal experiences. But the truth is most people have a strong curiosity about human behavior, and many of us possess high levels of empathy and good listening skills as part of our makeup. In addition, many people desire to have careers in which they can positively impact the lives of others. Were we to ask, we would find these same interests and desires among teachers, civil servants, attorneys, researchers, business owners, politicians, physicians, and artists, to name a few. Many of them chose their career paths in part because they saw an opportunity to use their talents and pursue their interests in ways that would help others or contribute to society.

If you are searching for a career in which you can positively impact the lives of others, our goal is not to dissuade you from this admirable pursuit. Instead, we want you to understand that a desire to help others, and even some possible inherent skill at doing so, is not a sound reason on its own to major in psychology. Those of you who possess this interest must work to learn about whether psychology is the right vehicle for you to accomplish your specific career goals.

Determining if Psychology is for You

Determining whether psychology is the best major for you can be difficult. The decision can in part be made easier by answering three questions in relation to the major. First, *do you understand and appreciate psychology as a scientific discipline?* Answering yes to this question means that regardless of your career interests in the field, you understand the purpose and value of having your undergraduate education be rooted in both the research and applied foundations of the field. Second, *are you and psychology a good fit?* An affirmative answer to this question means that what psychology offers at the undergraduate level matches your interests, skills, abilities, values, and ways of thinking about the world. Third, *is psychology the right vehicle to help you accomplish your career goals, even if they are not well defined at the moment?* In answering yes to this question, be sure that majoring in psychology will at least not impede your goals and will at most give you the best foundation for achieving them.

Determining whether psychology is right for you is going to require effort on your part. You will need to examine thoroughly the field and what it has to offer. This means learning about the field in general and investigating the specifics of the major as it is offered at your institution. The remainder of this book will provide extensive information to guide you in this process. We encourage you to engage the information with an open and critical mind, thinking carefully about your choices in your academic and career pursuits. Regardless of whether you decide psychology is right for you or determine that your interests and career goals are best served in another discipline, the process of exploring the field and yourself will have been well worth the effort.

Suggested Exercises

1. If you are still undecided about your major, talk with at least one faculty member in each of the areas you are considering in order to gain their perspectives on the advantages and limitations of the major at your institution. Also talk with individuals in the community who are working with degrees in the areas you are considering in order to gain their perspectives.
2. Talk with junior- and senior-level psychology majors about their experiences and any suggestions they have for students in your position. If you do not know any advanced students, contact a psychology student organization at your school (e.g., Psi Chi) to ask for names of students who would be willing to talk to you. The officers of these groups are often an excellent resource.
3. Talk with peers in your classes about why they are pursuing psychology. Listen for reasons that you think match yours as well as any different or novel reasons you may not have considered. Notice which of your peers seem to have given this more or less thought than you.

4. Ask the department of psychology at your institution if they can provide you with contact information for some recent alumni. Many departments maintain alumni databases, and many alumni are willing to take the time to talk with current students. If your department makes such information available, contact a few recent graduates to ask about their experiences as a student and see if they have any advice for you.

Suggested Readings by Topic Area

Introduction to Psychology

- King, L. A. (2014). *The science of psychology: An appreciative view* (3rd ed.). Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill.
- Myers, D. G. (2013). *Psychology* (10th ed.). New York, NY: Worth Publishers.
- Weiten, W. (2013). *Psychology: Themes and variations* (9th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Selecting a Major

- Fogg, N. P., Harrington, P. E., Harrington, T. F., & Shatkin, L. (2012). *College majors handbook with real career paths and payoffs: The actual jobs, earnings, and trends for graduates of 50 college majors* (3rd ed.). St. Paul, MN: Jist Publishing.
- Shatkin, L. (2011). *Panicked student's guide to choosing a college major: How to confidently pick your ideal path*. Indianapolis, IN: Jist Publishing.
- The College Board. (2013). *Book of majors 2014*. New York, NY: Author.

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