

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

Chapter **1**

The Purpose of Psychology

What is the purpose of psychology?

- » To gain knowledge of human minds and behavior through scientific study and research
- » To apply that knowledge for the benefit of society, and to improve lives of people by using scientific methods
- » To communicate and teach that knowledge and application to others

And what's the purpose of this book?

Well, to fulfill those three goals above, of course! I wrote it to educate, teach, and to be helpful. Honestly, I am a serious psychology nerd. I see psychology as an extremely interesting subject, a set of useful methods, and a great opportunity to learn more about people. I geek out on this stuff. I used to wander the psychology stacks of my university library just looking for something interesting, something that caught my eye, to discover something, to learn more. In essence, this book is a cumulation of my effortful curiosity. I hope to stimulate and fuel yours.



REMEMBER

We're all psychologists really. Some of us just happen to be "professional" psychologists. The difference between a professional psychologist and a non-professional psychologist is really a matter of degree (get it?), separated by focus, time spent, materials consumed, and methods used. Over the years, I have been asked (sometimes respectfully and nicely, sometimes not) these questions: "What makes you better at this than me? What do you know that I don't?" Well, I believe it's really a matter of degree, perspective, and the psychologist tools I use to see and do the "psychologist thing." Professionals in any field seem to immerse themselves in it. Again, it's a matter of degree. We all occupy the space of a "psychologist" to one degree or another. Psychologists just spend more time engaged in conscious and deliberate effort to stay in that space and look at the world from that viewpoint. We spend our time and careers occupying that space and doing the "psychologist thing," occasionally coming out of the trance to share what we have seen, think, and found to be objectively true, at least as far as science allows us. But ultimately, psychology is only one way of looking at people and the world they interact with.

Is psychology "right" about people? It may or may not be, but in an attempt to live up to that challenge, psychology uses the standards of science to do so, and if conducting and practicing psychological science lends itself to some use, exposes someone to one new idea or way of thinking, and helps just one person live a better life, then it has served a valuable role in the world. It is not privileged per se. It cannot explain everything about being human. Come on, that would just pompous and downright impossible.

Humbly, psychologists go about their business and hope to offer something to the world. One psychologist "figuring it all out" isn't the goal. I have countless more bad ideas than good ones, so I need to be part of a community of thinkers, other psychologists, and other scientists. I can put my ideas to the empirical test, share what I find, allow corrective feedback, and revise as I move forward conducting psychological science. Doing psychology is a thinking, doing, and communicating endeavor. I hope to do that with this book.

Before I give you a definition, I'm going to engage in a therapy cliché: Tell me what you think? Tell me how you feel? (There's an old joke about psychologists: How many psychologists does it take to screw in a light bulb? Two! One to do it and the other one to ask, "How does that make you feel?") 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 people.

Whys, Whats, and Hows of People

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?

How are you going to get those answers?

These are the three main questions that psychology is concerned with as well:

- » Why do people do what they do?"
- » What are the component parts of why and how?
- » How do people do what they do?

Here are some "Why?" questions:

- » Why am I happy?
- » Why can't I stop feeling sad?
- » Why did she break up with me?
- » Why didn't I say that? (as I walk away from an argument)
- » Why did I just say that? (as I get into an argument)

Here are some "What?" questions:

- » What are emotions?
- » What is mental illness?
- » What is intelligence?
- » What are thoughts?

Here are some "How?" questions:

- » How can I remember more?
- » How can I get my 2-year-old to stop throwing tantrums?
- » How does the mind work?
- » How does language develop?

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



REMEMBER

So it's finally time to define it: *Psychology is the scientific study of human behavior and mental processes.* Psychology attempts to uncover what people do along with why, what, and how they do it.

A useful metaphor: Building a person

Metaphors abound in psychology. They are used to provide extremely oversimplified and overarching “explanatory” models of people. Psychologists Dedre Gentner and Jonathan Grudin conducted a review of the metaphors used in psychology and identified 256! Over the years, people have been likened to “hairless apes,” computers, machines, nervous systems, and a host of others. However, remember that people are not “models,” but the models can be helpful in understanding people!

Now I'm going to enter into the fray with my own metaphor for better or worse. I don't think this metaphor is particularly unique, however, and there's likely chance that I borrowed it from someone else. But I think it's a good one, so here it is:

When I try to imagine all the reasons people do what they do, what they use to do it, and how they do it, I often run with a “mad-scientist” approach. I've always thought that one of the best ways to answer the why, what, and how questions would be to think about building a person and then set that person out performing the tasks of personhood, doing what persons do. Well, I'm not talking about actually building one like Dr. Frankenstein did — out of parts and brains and electricity — but creating a blueprint of a person's mind and behavior, performing functions, embedded in context, like a “performance space” of sorts, in the way that basketball players play basketball, singers give performances, and people do people stuff.

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.” (I can assure you that everyone is kept safe and this is done ethically!) 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, what, and how

questions of human behavior. (It's also a good example of an empirical approach in as much as the process is observable and testable.)

There may be a day when psychology reaches a pinnacle of knowing and understanding all the determinants of behavior, all the ingredients of the human mind, and all the processes. 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* or "recipe" 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 that I sometimes think like a mad scientist, right?

Yes, this is the kind of blueprint or overlay I like to use to understand what psychology is: Why do the parts and processes do it? What are the parts or ingredients of a person? How do we go about performing functions using those parts and ingredients to achieve the why?

So I guess my metaphor is Frankenstein's Monster. Maybe think about it as "Frankenstein's Machine" or "Dr. Cash's Machine" or maybe even a "Monster Machine."

Why?

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 materials are necessary and how they work together.

The foundations of this function approach are built on a philosophy known as *functionalism*, which is the notion that the mind, mental processes, and behavior are "tools" for adaptive functioning that lead to a human functioning most effectively in his or her environment (survival and perpetuation of the species).

Like all other carbon-based living organisms on planet Earth, human beings are "staying alive" machines. 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. But there's got to be more than that, right? Wrong book. Try *Philosophy For Dummies* or *Religion For Dummies*.

What?

From a psychological standpoint, what does the human "staying alive 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 to 9)

- 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
- Selves

» **Other people**

- Their minds
- Their feelings
- Their motivations
- Their brains

How?

I've talked about the why and the what, so what about the how? This is where psychology can get extremely interesting. This is where the rubber meets the

road, how whys and whats interact through the operations and processes of the mind and behavior. Here is a list of some of those operations and processes:

- » Sensing and perceiving
- » Moving
- » Fueling
- » Learning, as in the ability to learn from the environment
- » Thinking, paying attention, remembering
- » Being motivated
- » Feeling
- » Socializing
- » Growing

Troubleshooting

All these parts, developed and assembled, go about their tasks within the world, right? But the world acts upon them, influences them, impacts them. Whether that context is dealing with other people, interacting with technology, or being chased by something dangerous, the mad scientist's job would be incomplete without looking at the world around the assembled parts.

So 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 to keep the why going, with its parts and processes:

- » Coping and adapting
- » Repairing
- » Thriving

Putting It All Back Together Again

In case you were wondering (and worried), I am not engaged in an actual “build a human” project, except for having a “model” to work from. But if I did want my own Frankenstein’s monster, I’d have a very solid foundation and a good blueprint. Each of a person’s parts, processes, and sources of help represents a section or chapter of *Psychology For Dummies*, 3rd Edition.



REMEMBER

However, before we dive in to later chapters, I feel compelled to mention one last thing. It is obvious that psychology can be very reductionist. That is, it tries to take an extremely complex phenomenon, *people*, and break it down into parts and simple explanations. We’ve broken apart Humpty Dumpty, but can we put him back together again? People are not made up of X, Y, and Z. People are not just whys, whats, and hows. We’re not theories, models, experiments, or Dr. Cash’s “monsters.”

The longer I am psychologist, the longer I appreciate the complex, messy, and mysterious nature of people, despite doing this for over 25 years. There is never a day that goes by that I don’t learn something new about people, realize I was wrong about something or someone, and am humbled. I just want readers to know that despite my efforts to “break down” psychology, and in turn, people, this is only my reductionist attempt to understand people, and I hope I do it with respect, compassion, and humility.