

What is Psychology?

Definition of psychology

There are five key areas within psychology: cognitive psychology, developmental psychology, biological psychology, individual differences, and social psychology, and the topics you will study are drawn from these areas. Other areas that exist within the field of psychology include clinical, occupational, comparative, educational, criminal, and neuropsychology. In addition to these main areas, there are various approaches or perspectives to studying psychology: biological, behavioural, cognitive, and psychodynamic, which you will become familiar with during the course of your studies. Each approach takes a different view to explain psychological phenomena. Take a look at the worksheet that follows (see page 5) to find out more about these areas and approaches, which are fundamental to an understanding of psychology.

As you can see, psychology is diverse and challenging and so (nearly) always exciting!!!

Psychologists tend to specialise in a particular area of psychological research, such as children's acquisition of language, the nature and causes of aggression, or the development of moral reasoning. Some psychologists take a particular perspective, but most take an eclectic approach, which means that they draw from a broad range of theories and perspectives rather than being restricted to the approach of only one particular school of thought. This is because *no one theory in science is final*, hence the need to take a multi-perspective approach to studying psychology. This is considered by many to be the only way to deal successfully with the issues that psychologists address. The use of psychology in practical settings is called applied psychology, and the applications are based on research in one or more of the areas; for example, research into problem solving is based on cognitive psychology, and research into prejudice and discrimination is based on social psychology.

Here's a reminder of the five key areas that you are going to study at AS level:

Cognitive Developmental Biological Individual differences Social

Look at the following applications and see if you can decide which area the application is most likely to be derived from. Discuss this with the people sitting next to you and complete the worksheet with the correct areas. In some cases the application could be based on more than one approach, as a multi-perspective approach may need to be taken, and so you may conclude that it is based on research from more than one of the five areas (detailed on page 5). In these cases write all relevant areas in the boxes below.

Applications

Ψ How to improve memory.

Ψ The causes of schizophrenia.

Ψ What is the basis of interpersonal attraction?

Ψ The relationship between stress and illness.

Ψ Why some people conform and others don't.

Ψ Brain wave activity during sleep.

Ψ The physiological basis of depression.

Ψ Gender differences in socialisation.

Ψ What is normal/is anybody normal?

Ψ Do dreams have meaning or are they just a by-product of brain activity?

Ψ The relationship between the infant and caregiver.

Ψ Artificial intelligence.

Ψ Causes of relationship breakdown.

Ψ Relaxation training.

Ψ Attention deficits.

Ψ Are psychopaths born that way or created by society?

Cognitive psychology

'Cognition' refers to our mental processes, such as attention, perception, thinking, language, and memory. Thus, cognitive psychology looks at how we process information to understand the thoughts that underpin emotions and behaviour. It can overlap with social psychology in the area of social cognition, or with developmental psychology in the area of cognitive development. This approach focuses on the brain as an information processor and computers can be used as an analogy of the brain to help develop mental models to explain and understand cognitive processes.

Developmental psychology

Developmental psychology studies the biological, cognitive, social, and emotional changes that occur throughout the life span. As development is a lifelong process, developmental psychologists start their study with conception and pre-natal development, then move from infancy through to adolescence, adulthood, and finally old age. Topics studied could involve early cognitive development, the attachments formed between infants and their caregivers, and the gender roles acquired in early childhood. The psychodynamic perspective links well to this area because it claims that unconscious childhood conflicts shape adult behaviour.

Biological psychology

Biological psychology aims to establish the biological basis of behaviour. Body structures and functions, in particular brain processing, are investigated to see how they relate to behaviour. For example, the body's response to stress is a good illustration of a behaviour that has a biological basis. Biological psychologists study topics such as how the nerves function, how hormones affect behaviour, and how the different areas of the brain are specialised and related to different behaviours.

Individual differences

As expected, individual differences looks at the wide variation in individuals. It deals with studying the ways in which individuals differ in their psychological characteristics, and this will affect their intelligence, aggressiveness, willingness to conform, masculinity and femininity, and just about every other behaviour you can think of. An important individual difference is the degree to which a person is mentally healthy, and this gives rise to the study of abnormal psychology. However, what is considered to be normal for one person may not be considered to be normal by another person. This means that there is huge controversy and ambiguity in defining abnormality. Within abnormal psychology mental disorders are investigated such as eating disorders, schizophrenia, depression, and anxiety disorders.

Social psychology

'Social' refers to any situation involving two or more members of the same species. Social psychology investigates social interactions, such as interpersonal relationships, group behaviour, leadership, social influence, and the influence of the media. A social psychologist studying interpersonal relationships might study what we find attractive in others or what causes relationships to deteriorate and end. One who is studying social influence might look at how others influence us, e.g., conformity and obedience to authority.