

# Chapter

# 1

## A Little Psychological Insight

### In This Chapter

- ◆ Understanding psychology
- ◆ A day in the life
- ◆ Psychology's major players
- ◆ How psychologists “do” psychology
- ◆ Psychology's many points of view

Psychology has come a long way, baby, from its early years. Way back when, in the nineteenth century, much of what passed for psychological practice was based on guesswork, informed by the social prejudices of the day. It took the contributions of a great many careful researchers and deep thinkers to give birth to the modern science of psychology—and every day, new insights are achieved.

This chapter will tell you what psychology is and what it's not. You'll meet the major players in the development of the science, and you'll understand the tools psychologists use to figure people out. By the time you've finished this chapter, you'll be well on your way to thinking like a shrink!

## An Alienating Experience

The year was 1887. For many years, writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman had suffered from a severe and continuous nervous breakdown. Finally, out of desperation, she sought help from the most noted *alienist* in the United States.

This wise specialist in nervous disorders sent her home with the therapeutic advice to “live as domestic a life as possible,” to “have but two hours of intellectual life a day,”

and to “never touch pen, brush, or pencil to paper again.” Charlotte obeyed these instructions for three months—and came frighteningly close to the borderline of complete insanity. Fortunately, she survived the “help” of her doctor, and went on to write “The Yellow Wallpaper,” a story of a creative woman who is trapped by the conventional lifestyle of her day and ultimately finds freedom through writing.



### Shrink Rap

An **alienist** was a specialist who treated mental and nervous disorders before the science of psychology was developed.

## What's Psychology?

Psychology is the science of human nature. It's all about studying the human mind and behavior so we can figure out why people think, feel, and do what they do. How do we fall in love, communicate with each other, solve problems, and learn new things? Psychologists are constantly asking questions, developing theories, and conducting experiments so they can better understand human nature and improve our lives. Whether they're therapists, professors, or researchers, psychologists are constantly trying to reach four goals:

- ◆ To describe what people do
- ◆ To explain why people think, feel, and act the way they do
- ◆ To predict what, when, and how they will do it
- ◆ To change the parts of human behavior that cause us pain

Let's take a look at each of these goals.

## Telling It Like It Is

The first goal of psychology, describing human behavior, sounds easy; just watch what someone is doing and describe it. It's a lot tougher, though, than you might think. No matter how hard we try not to, we see each other through the filters of our prior experiences, our cultural values, and our beliefs.

For example, if you've just been dumped by the love of your life, it might be pretty hard to jump into a new relationship with complete optimism. You might try to protect yourself by watching closely for any sign of rejection. In fact, you might be so worried about getting hurt that you overlook evidence that your new love cares about you. Your mental filter has a worthy goal, to prevent more heartache, but it's still blinding you from seeing the world the way it really is.

Here's another example of how expectations and beliefs can cloud your vision: When asked to describe their newborns, parents of daughters will describe them as softer, smaller, and weaker than parents of sons, even when there is no actual difference in size, shape, or health. Even at birth, parents are "seeing" their children with eyes that reflect their expectations about gender.

Psychologists are people, too—we have our share of biases, expectations, and prejudices. These can get in our way when we're observing human behavior. Whether we're doing therapy or research, we're constantly trying to keep our values, expectations, and opinions out of our work. That's why therapists consult with their *own* therapists: to make sure they're keeping their own "stuff" from interfering with their sessions with their patients. "Telling it like it is" is no easy task!



### Insight

Want to start applying psychology to your life right now? Use what you learn in this book to solve just one real problem in your life—or at least, to understand it better.

## Why, Oh Why, Oh Why?

Any mystery novel buff will tell you the motive in the whodunit is as important as who did it. Like mystery writers, psychologists often focus on the motives driving a person's behavior. They look for connections between things that happen and how people respond. Why do some—but not all—abused children become abusive adults? How does a brain tumor affect someone's personality? Does watching violent television lead to violent behavior? These are examples of the kinds of relationships psychologists try to explain.

Explanations are also useful in everyday life. People often seek therapy to make sense out of a painful situation such as a divorce or a loss. Even if we can't change what has happened to us, understanding the reason it happened gives us a sense of comfort and control, a sense that maybe we can prevent it from happening again.

## What's Next?

Understanding why something happened is helpful, but being able to predict that something is going to happen gives us a lot more practical utility.

For example, here's a psychological fact of life: When it comes to human beings, the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior. How can that be useful in your day-to-day life?

Well, let's say you've been dating someone for six months and are starting to get serious. During a romantic dinner, your new love interest suddenly confesses he's been married nine times. This information might change your prediction about the odds that the two of you will turn gray together. You may be tempted to pull out your little black book of former loves and make a few calls. And you'd have good reason to do

### Psychobabble

Research shows that a psychologist is likely to overestimate the likelihood that prisoner Joe will become violent even after extensively interviewing and testing him. Asking a psychologist what a single person will do is like asking a physicist to predict what will happen to a particular drop of water in the ocean.

so—your dinner companion's past behavior suggests that, when it comes to long-term commitments, he's *not* a reliable candidate.

Or, at least, that's the obvious conclusion to draw. Unfortunately, the best predictor of human behavior isn't always accurate. As a profession, psychology has an abominable track record for predicting what any one person will do. Real life doesn't always cooperate with what theory says should happen—especially when you're dealing with what a single individual might do in a given set of circumstances. In that great deck of life, we're all wild cards!

When it comes to predicting behavior within a group, psychology does much better. For example, what if you wanted to predict the relationship between intelligence and success? Whether a smart individual will live up to his or her potential will be determined by lots of variables—maybe he or she is lazy, has a serious medical illness, or can't get along with others. A psychologist can't easily predict that intelligence in this *particular* person will result in success in life. But psychologists *can* accurately predict that intelligent people, taken as a group, are more likely to be successful than their unintelligent counterparts.

Similarly, an individual 19-year-old male may be the best driver in town—and wonder why he's stuck paying high premiums for car insurance. What he may not realize is that, because we can accurately predict that young men as a group are likely to be the worst drivers (we've got the accident statistics to bear this claim out), they are the most likely to get dinged on their car insurance rates.

## Becoming the New, Improved Model

Human beings are always trying to improve, do better, or feel better, so it should come as no surprise that psychologists want to do more than understand human behavior. We want to shape it, mold it, and generally help people run their lives more effectively. The heart of all psychological treatment is teaching a client how to control his or her behavior in the desired direction—to stop drinking, to communicate more effectively, to cope with the memories of a painful childhood.

## A Day in the Life of a Shrink

Psychologists are a funny group. Take a psychologist to the movies and he or she will watch the audience. We shrinks are always trying to figure out who people are and why they think, feel, and behave as they do. But there are lots of different ways we go about our work.

## The Couch Trip

Most people picture a psychologist sitting behind a couch or desk and listening to people's problems all day. They visualize Robin Williams in *Good Will Hunting* or Barbra Streisand in *The Prince of Tides*. These are images of clinical psychologists, the branch of psychology that trains us to deal with people's emotional and behavioral problems. However, although clinical psychology is the most popular area of specialization, most clinical psychologists aren't in private practice; most of us work in clinics, hospitals, or universities.

## We're Everywhere, We're Everywhere!

And we do a lot more than therapy. We teach, we promote mental and physical health, we help businesses run more smoothly, and we conduct research. You can find us in just about any place you find human beings—courtrooms, campuses, locker rooms, hospitals, or boardrooms.

And then there are the other branches of psychology. Not only do we study individual behavior, we study the relationships between individuals and anything they may do or influence. Social psychologists study how people



### Insight

Training in psychology can take us through some pretty unexpected twists and turns, professionally speaking. William Moulton

Marston, a psychologist, spent years trying to develop a lie detector test measuring blood pressure. That failing, he applied his knowledge of human nature in a different direction, and created the comic book character "Wonder Woman."

influence one another. Environmental psychologists work with architects and city planners to improve the “relationship” between human beings and their workspaces and living quarters. Believe it or not, there’s even a group, called human factors psychologists, who look at the relationships between workers and their machines!

## “Doing” Psychology

There are lots of ways to study human beings. Astrologists use the moon and the stars, philosophers apply logic and reasoning, and psychics consult tea leaves and crystal balls. Psychology got *its* start when great philosophers began thinking about human nature.

### How We Used to Do It

For hundreds of years, philosophers thought a lot about people, but most of them thought human nature was a spiritual matter that could not be studied scientifically. Luckily for us, in the seventeenth century, a philosopher by the name of René Descartes thought otherwise, and other people slowly began changing their minds.

It wasn’t until the end of the nineteenth century, though, that people went beyond just *thinking* about human nature and started *studying* it. In 1879, Wilhelm Wundt founded the first psychological laboratory at the University of Leipzig, in Germany, and psychology as an academic discipline was born. This transformed psychology from philosophy to a science, and forever changed the study of human behavior.

Intuition, logic, common sense, and introspection were no longer acceptable ways to study human nature. Researchers now had to look at objective, outside evidence that either confirmed or disconfirmed their ideas about human beings. Psychologists developed a “show-me” attitude.

### Psychology Today

In today’s scientific climate, valid research questions about human behavior are those that are testable and replicable. They should be answerable through someone’s first-hand experience, with no reliance on “experts,” hearsay, or religious dogma. If I wonder whether studying before a test lowers test-taking anxiety, I’ll research the question by finding students who hit the books before an exam and see whether they’re less nervous than their less studious counterparts.

Then, if you, too, are curious about the link between anxiety and studying, you can ask the same question, do the same research, and see if you get the same answer that I did. That’s the *scientific method*.

Research psychologists are always checking up on each other's findings. After scientists publish results, their colleagues try to shoot holes through them, offering alternative explanations, and seeing whether they can get the same result. This asking, theorizing, predicting, testing, and retesting forms the basis of what we know about human psychology today.

But not everything can be directly observed in a laboratory or field test. Many human activities, such as reasoning, creating, or dreaming, are private; we assume they happen, but we can't see them. Psychology as a science draws its conclusions about such activities by observing what a person does, when he or she does it, and how he or she does it.

Through their careful observations of human behavior, psychologists do make inferences about the mind. However, any judgments about thoughts or feelings must be checked out—after all, appearances *can* be deceiving. For example, if I greet my husband and he ignores me, I might immediately assume he's mad at me. If I ask him about it, however, I might learn that he wasn't giving me the silent treatment on purpose. Maybe he was preoccupied with work or, more likely, is temporarily hard of hearing after watching three football games at maximum volume!

### Psychobabble

Common sense has led more than one person astray. Sir Francis Galton thought there was an obvious, common-sense link between a person's intelligence and his or her head size. We know today that there is absolutely no truth to this theory. It also makes you wonder about Sir Francis, whose head was reportedly so small he could have been nicknamed "pinhead."



### Shrink Rap

The **scientific method** is a way of answering questions that helps remove bias from the study. First, you form your question into a statement that can be proven false, then you test it against observable facts. Other researchers who doubt your findings can duplicate your test and see whether they get the same results.

### Psychobabble

Not all questions about the mind and behavior can be answered by psychology. Questions like "Are some people born evil?" are important, but impossible to answer scientifically. How would we measure evilness? If evil is present at birth, we should find it in newborns; but how would we unlock the mind of a newborn? If we wait until the child is old enough to talk, his life experience may have contributed to his evil ways. What do psychologists do with questions like these? We pass the buck to philosophers.

## Methods to Studying Madness

Science gave psychologists some pretty clear guidelines for studying human behavior:

- ◆ Be skeptical.
- ◆ Keep your values and opinions separate from your ideas and beliefs.
- ◆ Only ask questions that you can answer yourself.
- ◆ Show other people your results.
- ◆ Make sure other people can check your answers.

Psychology as a science dictates what kinds of questions we can ask—they must be objective and replicable. But how do we decide which questions to ask? *Theories*, my dear Watson. A theory is a set of related principles used to explain or predict something.

Because human beings are so complex, psychologists have theories for just about everything from learning to child development, from memory to mental illness. Personality theories try to explain why human beings are the way they are; development theory looks at how children become grownups. And different theoretical perspectives about what parts of human nature are important influence the questions that can be asked.

If, for instance, we theorize that mental illness is a result of painful childhood experiences, we start to wonder what particular kinds of painful childhood experiences have the most impact. Or we may ask if the age at which the experience happens makes a difference.



### Shrink Rap

A **theory** is a set of assumptions about a question. A **hypothesis** is an answer to the question, based on theoretical assumptions that can be tested to see whether the answer can be proven wrong.

Next, we start to generate *hypotheses*, predictions about what we would expect to happen if our theory were true. If we believe a person's childhood has a major impact on his or her adult life, for example, we might expect abused children to have some problems when they grow up. To test our hypothesis, we would conduct a study using one or more scientifically appropriate research methods, chosen to suit the kind of question being asked. The most common research methods are *descriptive studies*, *correlation research*, and *experiments*.

## Delving into the Descriptive

If the question starts with “How often,” “How much,” or “How many times,” a *descriptive study* is the way to go. In this method, the researcher describes the behavior of a person or group of persons. For example, we might ask how much violence does the average child see on television? Or we might survey people to see what percentage of the population has been treated for depression. Or, if we’re assessing a person’s assertiveness, we might count the number of times he or she speaks up in a group.

## Is There a Relationship?

Descriptive studies give us a good idea of what we’re looking at, but they don’t tell us what it all means. For example, discovering the level of violence a child sees on television may be interesting, but we’re more concerned about discovering whether there’s a relationship between watching violent television and a child’s aggressive behavior. Correlational research tries to assess the relationship between two aspects of human behavior.

Let’s assume we were going to do a study on TV violence and aggressive behavior in children, beginning with the theory that there is a positive relationship between watching violent television and aggressive behavior in children. Our hypothesis is that children who watch violent television are more aggressive than those who watch little or no violent television.

Right away, we run into problems. How are we going to measure aggression? This sounds simple but it’s not. We might count the number of times a child is sent to the principal’s office, but that could be misleading: Some teachers run a tight ship, whereas others may be real slackers. Similarly, depending on siblings to tattletale introduces all kinds of problems, such as loyalty, sibling rivalry, and even the possibility of bribery! All of these extra issues can make our measurements unreliable.

One way to overcome such problems is to give the children’s parents some kind of behavior rating scale that clearly defines aggressive behavior. We’ll be equally clear in defining



### Brain Buster

Research is only as good as the theory behind it, and the best theories are simple, precise, and testable.



### Shrink Rap

A correlational study can tell us whether a relationship exists between two things, but it can’t give us the nature of that relationship. For example, it can’t tell us whether one thing causes the other. There might be all sorts of other factors that influence the relationship. So correlational studies are generally followed by another kind of research tool—the experiment.

what we want to count as exposure to violent television: Do we measure the number of violent incidents in any show or just the number of violent shows? Does yelling count as violence? Do shoot-'em-up cartoons rate the same as live news coverage of Bosnia?

Once we have measured both behaviors, we compare the results. If children with high violent television viewing are also rated as more aggressive than children who watch tamer fare, we have some support for our theory. If, on the other hand, children who watch violent television are less aggressive, we'd have to look for another explanation. And we'd have a new hypothesis to test: Perhaps watching violent television serves as a safe outlet for children's anger and aggression and actually reduces the odds that they will act violently.

## The Experimental Experience

To tease out the cause and effect between two things, the researcher changes one and sees what effect this change has on the other. The thing the experimenter changes is called the *independent* variable; the thing that is influenced by the independent variable is called the *dependent* variable.

If we want to find out whether exposure to violent television causes children to be more aggressive, we might show children violent television one hour this week, ten hours the next, and five hours the week after that. Each week, we'd see how changing the TV-watching time (the independent variable) affects aggression levels (the dependent variable).

But our experiment may still fail to give us clear-cut results. That's because of *confounding variables*—things that aren't supposed to be a part of the experiment but creep in anyway and influence the results.

In our example, parental expectations might confound the results. If parents knew the amount of violent television their children were watching each week, they might unintentionally rate their children as being more aggressive during weeks of heavy viewing because they expected that behavior. We can try to safeguard against this by leaving the parents in the dark about the actual amount of their child's exposure to violent television during the period of our observations (but, of course, we'd get the parents' permission for this at the outset of the experiment).

## Ethical Dilemmas

Psychological researchers face a dilemma when conducting experiments. On the one hand, they want to protect people's rights to be fully informed about the experiment and, on the other, they know that too much knowledge might skew the results. In our

violence-and-aggression experiment, for instance, we would need to let the parents know that we were not going to inform them of the actual amount of violent programming the children watched each week—and we’d need to get their permission to keep them in the dark about it.

To help them walk that fine line, psychological researchers are ethically bound by the following guidelines:

- ◆ Tell the subject as much as possible.
- ◆ Make sure the subjects know they can quit the experiment at any time.
- ◆ Look for any possible way to conduct experiments without using deception.
- ◆ If deception is absolutely necessary in order to prevent bias, let subjects know that some details of the experiment are being withheld until all the data have been collected.
- ◆ Give the subject the full scoop after the experiment is complete.

## Multiple Perspective Disorder

If you’ve ever seen the movies *Sybil* or *Three Faces of Eve*, you’re aware of multiple personality disorder, a rare mental illness in which a person develops different personalities to cope with severe childhood trauma. Psychologists have their own version of this, and it has haunted the field of psychology since its early years: I call it multiple perspective disorder.

Imagine setting out to become the world’s authority on elephants and studying only their legs. You can tell a lot about an elephant from his legs—the texture of its skin, the climate in which it lives, maybe even its travel patterns. You might even make a few guesses about its size and weight. On the other hand, you would be clueless about its mating habits, eating rituals, or defense strategies. Even if you studied for years, the best you could do is become the leading expert on elephant legs. It’d be ludicrous to claim you truly understood elephants.



### Insight

The human mind is amazingly complex. No single perspective—the biological, the behavioral, the emotional—can tell the whole story.

Yet for years, that’s exactly what some psychologists did. Some groups studied the mind, while others focused on human behavior. Some believed childhood influences unlocked the key to our psyches and spent their time analyzing dreams and unlocking childhood memories. Others believed it was the here and now that mattered. Seven

different perspectives emerged during the twentieth century, and most of them claimed to be *the* right way to study human nature. At times, battles became pretty heated over whose perspective was right.

Fortunately, psychologists today value the unique contribution of *each* psychological perspective. While some psychologists might still tell you that their beliefs about human nature fall in line with one particular perspective, in practice they are likely to apply whichever perspective best deals with the problem at hand. For, as you shall see, each perspective offers valuable insights into human nature. The seven perspectives most prevalent today include:

1. The biological perspective
2. The psychodynamic perspective
3. The behaviorist perspective
4. The humanist perspective
5. The cognitive perspective
6. The sociocultural perspective
7. The evolutionary perspective

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## Meet the Major Players in Psychology

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René Descartes (1596–1650)	First philosopher to think human nature could be studied
Charles Darwin (1809–1882)	Father of evolutionary psychology
Wilhelm Wundt (1832–1920)	Father of clinical psychology, started first psychological lab
John Dewey (1887–1977)	Published America’s first psychology textbook
J. McKeen Cattell (1860–1944)	America’s first professor of psychology
Sigmund Freud (1856–1939)	Founder of psychoanalysis
John B. Watson (1878–1958)	First American behaviorist
Karl Lashley (1890–1958)	Pioneer in biological psychology
Carl Rogers (1902–1987)	Major humanist, argued for building self-esteem
Jean Piaget (1895–1980)	Early cognitivist, studied how children learn to think and reason
Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934)	Sociocultural pioneer, studied how children mind their culture

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## I Was Born This Way

Biological psychology enjoyed its most recent vogue during the 1990s when Congress declared it the “decade of the brain.” And what a decade it was! Thanks to biological psychology, we have a much better understanding of the role our biological makeup plays in mental health and mental illness.

The biological perspective looks to the body to explain the mind. Biological psychologists look at the influence of hormones, genes, the brain, and the central nervous system on the way we think, feel, and act. How much of our personality is inherited? Is there a gene for suicide? Does mental stress cause physical illness? Do the brains of schizophrenics function differently than those of normal people? In the endless “nature versus nurture” debate of human behavior (see Chapter 3), biological psychology clearly sides with nature.

Biological psychology has been instrumental in the development of medications that effectively treat depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia. It has reawakened our awareness of the mind/body connection and given us specific ways to measure, and conquer, stress. Through its identification of the physiological components of many mental illnesses, it has helped tear down the false dichotomy between illnesses of the mind and illnesses of the body. This has helped to remove the stigma associated with mental illness—a development that has been as beneficial to people’s mental health as any technique we’ve developed in the last 10 years!



### Brain Buster

Your genes may be causing your blues! We now know that depression runs in families, and that there are chemical changes in the brain that coincide with clinical depression. Medications can adjust these changes and chase depression away.

## It's Only the Tip of the Iceberg

The psychoanalytic perspective (psychoanalysis is the technique, not the theory) views behavior as driven by powerful mental conflicts locked deep within the subconscious. Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, thought most people were riddled with conflicts between their own needs and society’s demands.

Freud thought that an adult’s mind was like the tip of an iceberg: he believed that conflicts arise, and are pushed down, when we are children. Because of this, we have little insight into the motives that drive our behavior as adults. We do, however, get clues through dreams, *slips* of the tongue, or sudden, unexplainable behavior. Freud believed that unconscious conflicts were the source of his patients’ pain and frequently led them to behave in an irrational manner.

Freud also believed that children are naturally sexual and aggressive, but he believed that society was not willing to accept these natural urges in youngsters. He specifically pointed the finger at parents who, he claimed,

often became upset when faced with a child's erection or natural interest in bodily functions, and often punished the child for expressing natural urges.



### Shrink Rap

A **Freudian slip** is a mistake or substitution of either spoken or written words. Freud believed that such "slips" come from unconscious wishes that pop up unexpectedly through unintentional words. By analyzing these "slips," a person might get some clues into his inner thoughts or "real" intent or wishes.

Thus Freud explained the beginnings of psychological and behavioral problems. To survive the threat of parental punishment, the child quickly learned to push these natural urges out of sight and out of mind. Freud attributed much of human discomfort to the ongoing battle between our own individual needs and desires and society's rules and norms, a battle that continues long after we pass through childhood.

Freud was perhaps the first to stress the influence of traumatic childhood events on shaping our personalities and worldviews. He was the first to recognize that human behavior is not always rational or easy to explain. He was also the first to use talking in a therapeutic setting as a cure for mental illness, and to see the healing that can occur when a client remembers, and works through, the trials and tribulations of childhood. Last but not least, Freud certainly had a way with words; he gave us many words that are now a common part of our lingo: Oedipal complex, penis envy, id, ego, and superego.

## We're Just Rats Caught in a Maze

The behavioral perspective all started with rats. After spending many years watching rats race through mazes, a psychologist named John Watson realized he could accurately predict where a rat would run if he knew where it had found food on previous trials. He was impressed with the amount of information he could learn about rats just by watching their behavior and understanding the environment in which it occurred. And he could change the rat's behavior pretty quickly by putting the food in a different place.

Maybe, he thought, people aren't much different. Maybe we aren't as complicated as we think, and maybe all that mental mumbo jumbo like thoughts and feelings doesn't matter. Maybe, he proposed, human behavior is as simple as **ABC**:

**A**ntecedent

the environmental trigger

**B**ehavior

the behavioral response to  
the environmental trigger

**C**onsequence

what happens next

Watson believed psychology should seek to understand people by studying what happens to them and how they respond. His focus was firmly on the bottom line: behavior. He theorized that behavior usually started as a response to an environmental event. From this he went on to reason that the consequences of that response would determine whether that behavior would increase over time or become less frequent.



### Insight

You can (and probably already do, sometimes) use behaviorism in your daily life. Anytime you use praise or rewards to get the kids to do their chores, you're acting like a behaviorist!

Let's say that every time the phone rings, your new love interest is on the line. Chances are you'll start racing for the phone at the first ring. On the other hand, if bill collectors often give you a jingle, you might ignore the telephone no matter how many times it rang.

Behaviorism ruled the psychological roost for almost 50 years, and it contributed many practical tools and ideas. For one thing, it shifted the focus of psychological research from generating insights onto behavior change. It gave us behavior modification, a process of shaping someone's behavior by consistently rewarding the desired actions, thus earning the eternal gratitude of countless parents, teachers, and savvy spouses! And it gave us some pretty powerful weapons against irrational fears and phobias (see Chapter 18).

### Psychobabble

Watson responded a little too enthusiastically to one of the stimuli in his environment; an extramarital affair with his research assistant, Rosalie Raynor, became public knowledge and he was fired from his prestigious position at Johns Hopkins University. No other university would pick him up after that scandal.

## I Think, Therefore I Am

Cognitive psychology is the study of people's ability to acquire, organize, remember, and use knowledge to guide their behavior. Cognitive psychologists think we're much more than a bunch of rats. Yes, they say, we react to our environment, but we also act upon it: People solve problems, make decisions, and consider options and alternatives before we act.

The cognitive perspective assumes that there are connections between what people perceive, think, feel, and do. Unlike the behaviorists, cognitive psychologists think that what goes on inside someone's head is of critical importance. In fact, they believe that a lot of how we feel and what we do starts with what we're thinking, not with some impersonal stimulus from the environment. They would argue, for example,

that someone who sees a cancer diagnosis as a meaningful personal challenge is likely to approach his or her treatment very differently than someone who views it as a death sentence.

Although the cognitive perspective focuses on the mind, it doesn't rely on introspection or intuition to study it. Cognitive psychologists study human behavior and then make inferences about the mind from their observations. For example, Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget gave children a series of problems to solve and then documented the mistakes they made and their reasons for their answers. After testing many children at varying ages, he developed his theory about how children develop their ability to reason.

Cognitive researchers develop theories about the mental processes that influence what we do. They test those theories by creating situations in which people would be expected to behave in one predictable way (if the theory were true) or in another way (if the theory were not true). Through the influence of cognitive psychology, we understand more about decision making, creativity, and problem solving than ever before. We've also learned how to do them better.

The influence of cognitive psychology is everywhere today. You see it in the numerous self-help books that proclaim the power of self-talk, and in the concept of attitude adjustment. If you've ever heard anyone say, "When life gives you lemons, make lemonade," he or she is speaking from a cognitive perspective.

## It's a Dog-Eat-Dog World

You're probably familiar with Darwin's "survival of the fittest" idea. Darwin basically thought that the creatures whose inherited characteristics were best adapted to the

environment were the ones that survived and reproduced. If a duck with a wide beak can get more food than narrow-beaked ducks, wide-beaked ducks will survive. Over time, all ducks will have wider beaks.

Evolutionary psychology applies that same principle of *natural selection* to human behavior. It holds that human beings, as a species, have acquired innate problem-solving tendencies that promoted their survival and reproduction. Evolutionary psychologists study behaviors that are common among all humans and try to figure out how they helped us become top dog of the animal kingdom. They believe that a key to understanding human nature is in the behavior of



### Shrink Rap

**Natural selection** is the Darwinian principle that says the best-adapted traits are the ones that will be passed along from one generation to another in a species. Creatures with less-well-adapted traits will die out before they can reproduce, so their poorly adapted traits will eventually disappear from the population.

our ancestors; if we can reconstruct the problems our ancestors dealt with, we can understand the problem-solving tendencies that helped them survive and thus became a genetic part of being human.

For example, all human beings hate, love, and get angry. Evolutionary psychologists would say we inherited the ability to express our feelings from our ancestors because the ability to communicate feelings and intentions helped them survive. Once we know how our emotions evolved, we can be more aware of, and therefore control, these natural tendencies.

Of course, who, what, or when any one human being will love is a lot more complicated; we must also look at his or her culture, life experiences, genes, and personality. And, we still have to contend with the here and now. A man might blame his having an affair on an ancestral legacy that called for men to ensure maximum reproduction by mating with multiple partners. He's still going to face his wife's wrath, and, possibly, the consequences of his behavior in court!



### Insight

Evolutionary psychologists have identified 26 behavior traits that all humans on our planet share. Here are a just a few of the more interesting ones: deception, detecting emotions, gossip, humor, perception of status/rank, and romantic love.

## No Man Is an Island

Why do eating disorders only occur in countries like the United States, where “thin” is the beauty ideal? If aggression is a human instinct, why is the rate of violence so different from country to country? A sociocultural psychologist would tell you if you want to understand such human behaviors, you must start with the culture in which they live.

All human beings have minds, but each culture produces a different version. The sociocultural perspective focuses on the differences among people living in various cultures as well as the ways by which people's thoughts, feelings, and behavior are influenced by their culture. From this perspective, our culture influences how we think, feel, and act. Culture teaches us about the roles we play and gives us informal rules about what is, and what is not, socially acceptable. If you've ever visited in another country, you've encountered the sociocultural perspective up close; it can be quite a shock realizing that what's “normal” is suddenly different!

Even psychology has cultural biases. In the United States, a country that values self-sufficiency and individualism, the focus of therapy is often on individual behavior change. In many Asian countries, where fitting into the group is a more highly valued trait, therapy would emphasize the understanding and acceptance of ourselves and the

people around us. And, in some Latin American cultures, where the family unit is *numero uno*, it would seem absurd to treat someone without including the whole family; behavior we would describe as healthy and independent might be viewed as selfish!

## Look on the Bright Side

Undoubtedly, the stereotype of the “touchy-feely” psychologist started with a humanist. As a backlash against the doom and gloom of the psychoanalytic perspective and the behaviorist’s robotic view of mankind, the humanists looked on the bright side of human nature. People are naturally good, the humanists said, and if left to their own devices, they will strive to become the best they can be. Problems only come up when other people get in their way.

According to this view, a parent or teacher might criticize a child’s natural attempt to grow. If this happens often enough, such criticized children begin to doubt their own thoughts and feelings. They begin to see themselves as incapable and, as a result, start mistrusting their own judgment. As adults, they may not take charge of their own lives because they no longer believe they are capable of doing so.

With this theoretical viewpoint, it’s not surprising that regaining a positive self-concept is a major therapeutic goal. The self-esteem movement started with humanists; in addition to their emphasis on promoting positive self-concepts, the humanists encourage therapists to look at their clients’ *psychological reality*—the way they perceive their experiences, rather than focusing on the experiences themselves. From the humanist perspective, a person’s view of his or her life is much more important than what actually happened—understand his perspective and you’ll know why he thinks, feels, and acts the way he does.

## Psychology in Action

Different psychological perspectives offer different explanations for the same behavior. Take a look at how each perspective might try to explain this fictional scenario:

Janine, a straight-A college student and track star, lined up to compete at the NCAA 5,000-meter regional finals—held later on the same day that she had to take her MCAT. Having spent the night studying for that all-important exam, Janine was operating on three hours of sleep. As the runners took off, Janine got off to a slow start and fell behind. Suddenly, she veered off the track, scaled an 8-foot fence, and jumped off a 45-foot bridge. Her injuries ended her running career and indefinitely postponed her dream of medical school.

## A Potpourri of Psychological Perspectives

Perspective	Burning Questions	Possible Answers
Psychoanalytic	What forces drove Janine so hard that she “snapped”?	Maybe her parents pushed her too much, perhaps she overcompensated for feelings of inadequacy by “winning” and panicked at the thought of failure.
Behaviorist	What have been the previous consequences for Janine when she lost a race? In the past, did she usually lose when she fell behind?	Maybe past losses were followed by painful consequences (criticism or derision) and Janine was trying to avoid experiencing them again.
Humanist	Was Janine’s self-image such that she only felt loved and respected when she won?	Maybe she was trying to change the basis of her self-worth or trying to test her friends’ and family’s love for her.
Cognitive	What was Janine thinking during the race? How did these thoughts lead her to act the way she did?	Maybe her fear of failure interfered with her ability to think rationally and thus impaired her judgment.
Sociocultural	What has American culture taught Janine about winning and the price of failure? How would she expect others to treat her if she lost the race?	Maybe Janine’s behavior was so desperate because of the social consequences she anticipated if she failed, maybe she took “winning isn’t everything, it’s the only thing” to the extreme.
Biological	Did Janine have an undetected medical condition that was running? Did she have a biological predisposition toward impulsive behavior?	Maybe Janine had an untreated chemical imbalance, maybe she had been aggravated by the stress of a brain tumor or some other physical problem that caused her to act out of character, maybe the physical effects of sleep deprivation were a factor.
Evolutionary	Was Janine’s behavior an example of adaptive behavior gone awry?	Maybe Janine perceived her fear of failure like our ancestors perceived threatening predators and was trying to flee from them.

Each perspective approaches the scenario from a different set of assumptions (theoretical position) and therefore comes up with a different question to answer. Each

question has a certain amount of validity, but it's clear that no single perspective asks, and answers, every question that the scenario raises. In the chapters that follow, we'll look more closely at how insights from all of these psychological perspectives have contributed to the development of the science of psychology as we know it today.

## **The Least You Need to Know**

- ◆ Psychology is the scientific study of human nature.
- ◆ Psychologists wear a lot of different hats: We help people solve their problems, and we use our knowledge about human behavior to help courts, companies, schools, and sports teams run more efficiently.
- ◆ Because psychology is a science, the questions it raises must be objective and testable, and research must be theory-based, systematic, and replicable.
- ◆ There are seven major psychological perspectives in psychology today: biological, psychodynamic, sociocultural, evolutionary, cognitive, humanist, and behaviorist.
- ◆ Each of the perspectives employed by psychologists have contributed important insights into the how and why of human nature.