Introduction

Chapter 1  **Boundaries of psychology**  
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Chapter 2  **Research design and methods**  
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Chapter 3  **Measurement in psychology**  
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Chapter 4  **Describing data**  
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Chapter 5  **Research ethics**  
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KEY IDEAS

• Empirical investigations in psychology may be experimental, quantitative observational, or qualitative.

• All investigation designs and methods of assessing psychological responses have advantages and disadvantages.

• All research involving humans has ethical dimensions.

• Different types of representation are appropriate for different types of data.

AREAS OF LEARNING

• The range of investigation designs that can be used to answer a particular research question and their advantages and disadvantages; the three investigation designs used in psychology — experimental, quantitative observational, and qualitative; focus groups and the Delphi technique as examples of qualitative investigations; advantages and disadvantages of quantitative and qualitative investigations; the difference between experimental investigations and quantitative observational investigations in their design.

• The three methods of assessing psychological responses
  - objective quantitative measures (e.g. physiological measures such as heart rate, behavioural counts, scores on standardised intelligence tests),
  - subjective quantitative measures (e.g. responses on checklists and rating scales, scores on personality tests), and
  - qualitative assessment of data; content analysis of responses in focus groups as an example of qualitative assessment; awareness of the limitations of drawing conclusions using small or unrepresentative samples; consideration of the validity and reliability of the methods.

• Descriptive statistics (i.e. the ways in which quantitative and qualitative data may be represented and described); the generalisation of research findings. Instruction in statistics should be limited to determining medians, means, and standard deviations, and generating graphic representations of distributions. However, a brief description of the function of inferential statistics and criteria for significance will enable students to read original research with some understanding.

• Ethical issues associated with investigations; the ethical safeguards that have been incorporated in particular investigations.

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Welcome to Psychology! While this book has been written specifically to support the Year 12 curriculum in South Australia, we also hope it will provide a general introduction to psychology for other interested readers.

In this first chapter we introduce some of the topics in which psychologists are interested. One of the most important characteristics of psychology is that it can be studied as a science. This means that it seeks to use scientific methods to gather data that will help us answer questions about human behaviour and experience. The fact is that all of us, at some level, are amateur psychologists. We each have to make sense of and predict other people’s behaviour in our everyday lives. However, as we shall soon discover, understanding human behaviour is much more complex than we may think. Humans are indeed complex animals.

This course has two broad aims. First, it aims to outline what psychologists have discovered about the workings of the brain, mind and behaviour. Second, it aims to help you apply this knowledge to your own life, and society in general, in positive ways. These aims are particularly important given our changing society. Every day we become more aware of, say, the increase in relationship breakdowns, drug addiction, crime and mental illness. Consequently, we have chosen an experienced team from the School of Psychology at the University of South Australia to assist us in understanding these issues. Twenty psychologists from South Australia have each written on an area of their expertise that will help extend your knowledge of psychology. Our journey will begin with what psychology is. Then we will look at what to expect in the course of your study and how this Essentials Psychology book is structured.

So what is psychology

The ultimate aim of psychology is to systematically describe and explain humans in their fullness as thinking, striving, talking and cultured animals. Psychologists have traditionally pursued this aim by systematically comparing different groups. Comparisons have been made, for example, between mankind and animals (comparative psychology), between adults and children (developmental psychology), different social settings (social psychology), and between healthy and unhealthy functioning (abnormal psychology).

Psychology can be defined as the scientific study of the behaviour of individuals and their mental processes. This definition isn’t as simple as it appears. Compared to other sciences, psychology is abstract and defies easy measurement. There is not the same degree of organisation of knowledge as might be found in the natural sciences. Psychology still lacks fundamental key concepts that unite the discipline. In other words, there is still much debate between psychologists about what the study of psychology does, and should, involve. However, there is general agreement about the subject matter of psychology and the methods that may be used to explore it.

In our view, there are the three different ways of describing psychology:

1. levels of explanation used to understand human behaviour and experience, from the biological through to the socio-cultural.
2. methods used to investigate psychological phenomena.
3. historical accounts of the development of psychology.
1. Levels of explanation in psychology

There is a considerable range and diversity of topics that potentially can be studied within psychology. Psychologists describe human behaviour and experience at many different levels, including biological, basic processes, person and socio-cultural. These different levels of explanation are explored throughout this book as required by the curriculum statement.

Whereas some areas of psychology focus on one level of explanation, others are best understood at many different levels. For example, sleep is probably most easily studied at a biological level, but our attitudes and beliefs are best understood in relation to other people and are, therefore, best explained at a socio-cultural level. Other areas, such as mental disorders, are probably best understood across all levels.

2. Methods of investigation

A second way to describe psychology is in terms of methods of investigation. While a variety of methods are used in psychology, there is a basic commitment to the systematic and rational investigation of psychological phenomena. Underpinning much of modern psychology is a commitment to the collection of scientific evidence to support rational argument and solve problems. It is this, perhaps more than anything else, which distinguishes psychology from other social sciences, or indeed from common sense itself.

For this reason, the opening topic of this book is about how you might conduct research in psychology, construct an appropriate design and choose appropriate methods. Included in this topic are ways in which you might plan a psychological investigation, how you might collect and analyse data, and how you should read and understand psychological research that others have conducted. The skills and methods described in Topic 1 will be useful in learning about all the other topics within this book and in your Research Program and Investigations.

3. History and development of psychology

A third way of describing psychology is through an historical account of the development of the discipline. Psychology is a relatively new discipline, only really establishing itself in the 20th century. Over the course of this time, psychology has been characterised by a focus on individual levels of explanation, from an early clinical interest in personality and mental health problems, through to a focus on behaviour and the way in which the environment shapes it. For more information please refer to Chapter 27.

In the past, psychology has been closely tied to a medical model, with a focus on mental disorders or behavioural problems. More recently, however, there has been a resurgence of interest in psychology towards understanding human experience and behaviour, not only in terms of how each of these levels interacts, but also in terms of understanding more about human happiness and spirituality. We believe these new areas will be a major focus for future thought and research within psychology.

Why study psychology

There are many reasons why you may have chosen to study psychology. You may wish to understand more about yourself, other people and society. Perhaps you want to become a critical consumer of information and learn how to solve problems in a more logical and coherent way. You may want to become a more effective communicator or researcher. Or you may even want to learn how to help other people or help tackle important social problems. While psychology may not have all of the answers, it clearly offers some directions through which solutions may be sought.
Most people who study psychology want to find out more about themselves. In this book you will read many things that remind you of yourself, or those you are close to. This is inevitable, after all we are all human and psychologists study human experience. When reading about mental health problems, it is easy to recognise symptoms in ourselves. After all, we all worry or feel unhappy from time to time, and studying for Year 12 can be a demanding experience! Often when people first study psychology they diagnose themselves with all sorts of problems and disorders. Please be aware of this possibility when reading this book, and don’t worry unnecessarily. If, of course, you are really concerned about something, it is important that you speak to someone about this—for example, a parent or family member, teacher, school counsellor, or family doctor.

You also may be inclined to want to diagnose psychological disorders, or even provide therapy, for others around you. We strongly advise against this as there is danger in applying limited knowledge to complex problems. Studying Stage 1 or Stage 2 Psychology does not provide professional training in psychology. However, this book may inform and inspire you to go on and study psychology as part of a future career. If this is the case, you may want to consider a number of courses available at TAFE or university where psychology is taught as part of a program. Studies may include psychology, counselling, community studies, youth work, social work, child studies, aboriginal education, management or marketing.
Whatever your motivations for reading this book, few people begin studying psychology with any clear idea of what it might involve. Over the course of this book, we hope to provide an overview of some of the major areas of psychology.

This book is divided into six separate topics. The opening topic is an introduction and is concerned with research design and methodology. As previously discussed, psychologists are proud of their rigorous approach to study, and base many of their opinions and beliefs on research data. The second topic on social cognition is concerned with human social relationships and uses the socio-cultural level of explanation. The topic on learning looks at human behaviour in terms of how animals and humans react to the environment and uses the basic processes level of explanation. The personality topic seeks to understand more about the extent to which we change as people over the course of our lives and draws on the person level of explanation. The topic on altered states of awareness explores human consciousness from an essentially biological perspective. Finally, the topic on healthy minds seeks to integrate many of these areas of learning to further our understanding of mental health and mental disorder. Consequently, we would suggest that you read Topic 6 Healthy Minds last.

You will notice as you read the book that each topic concludes with a chapter on ethics. Ethical practice is emphasised because psychologists need to be acutely aware of the impact of their work on other people. In the vast majority of cases psychological knowledge is used constructively for the benefit of individuals and their communities. However, it can at times be misused. Care needs to be taken so that researchers and practitioners do not harm other people. Understanding some of the ethical issues associated with psychology will help to ensure that this does not happen.

In the next four chapters we will learn about how psychologists set about gathering this data. First, they have to formulate a research question and choose a research design that will help them to answer the question. They then have to choose a research method to gather the data. Finally, they have to analyse the data appropriately in order to know whether or not they have answered their question.

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**Key Terms**

Psychology, Ethics

**Focus Questions**

1. Define psychology and explain how psychology differs from other sciences.
2. List 3 different ways of describing psychology.
3. What are the four ‘levels of explanation’ in this course?