

What Is Psychology?

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll discuss what psychology is, as well as the different goals that are involved in this vast field.

In particular, we'll look at:

1. Definition of Psychology
2. Goals of Psychology

1. Definition of Psychology

The word **psychology** comes from both the Greek word *psyche*, which means the mind or soul, and the Greek word *logos*, which means reason, argument, or the study of.

Thus, the word psychology literally means the study of the human mind and **behavior**, and it's important to notice each of the two parts to this definition.

The study of psychology examines the mind through all the different types of mental processing that occur within the brain on a daily basis, as well as the behaviors that can be observed outside of the mind itself.

That second part is key because psychology is a scientific study, meaning that it looks at things through **scientific observation**, and uses the **empirical evidence** acquired through direct observation to reach a conclusion.

This is different than a field like philosophy, which looks at things that can be more subjective. Science and psychology are more objective fields of study, and because of its objectiveness, psychology often examines things that are considered common sense, or commonplace ideas, that people generally feel like they understand.

A lot of times when studying psychology, you might find that you're studying something that you feel like you already know. While this is true to some degree, studying science also means you're trying to test the validity of those ideas.

➞ **EXAMPLE** A common saying in English is that "birds of a feather flock together." Conversely, there's

also the saying that "opposites attract." The first saying implies that similar people tend to gravitate towards each other, whereas "opposites attract" means that completely different people tend to gravitate towards each other.

Through psychology, you're able to take a look at both of these sayings and find that people do tend to gravitate towards people that are more similar to them. The first statement is thus more accurate. While both sayings seem like common sense, psychology involves studying the mind and behavior to determine the objective truth behind such statements about them.



TERMS TO KNOW

Psychology

The scientific study of mental activities and behavior

Behavior

Any human activity

Scientific Observation

Planned, systematic use of empirical evidence to study the world in an intersubjective fashion

Empirical Evidence

Information acquired by direct observation or measurement, such as testing, lab work, electrical metering, etc.

2. Goals of Psychology

The overall goal of the study of psychology is to gain knowledge about the mind and behavior, especially knowledge that can be beneficial to people.

This is particularly true in a field like clinical psychology, which studies psychopathology and mental disorders to better understand the mind in order to help people.

While this is the overall goal of psychology, there are four more specific goals involved in the study:

- **Description:** When studying psychology, you want to examine both the mind and behavior in a good enough way that you can describe what's happening within the person. In other words, you want to be able to provide an accurate and thorough description of both what you understand to be occurring within the mind, as well as what you see happening with behavior.
- **Prediction:** You also want to try to predict what's going to happen next. Prediction involves understanding what you've learned well enough that you can say, with reasonable certainty, what would happen to a person in a given situation.
- **Understanding:** Third, you want to be able to understand the mind and behavior. True understanding means not only stating what is happening but also being able to state the underlying causes. If you have understanding, you can explain what's occurring, both within the brain and the body, to affect the mind and behavior.
- **Control:** Finally, you want to be able to control these underlying causes, which connects back to the overall goal of helping people. Ultimately, those who study psychology want to benefit people by

understanding the mind and behavior well enough to control the more negative or problematic aspects of psychology.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that the **definition of psychology** has two parts: Psychology not only involves studying what's happening inside the mind but the observable behavior that's occurring as well.

You now understand that while the overall **goal of psychology** is to gain knowledge of the mind and behavior in order to help others, there are four more specific goals of the study: **description** of what's occurring in the mind and body, **prediction** of what will occur, **understanding** of the underlying causes, and **control** of the more negative aspects of psychology.

Good luck!

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Erick Taggart.



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