

PART 1

PSYCHOLOGY AS A DEGREE



1

WHAT IS A PSYCHOLOGY DEGREE?

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AIMS OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter aims to:

- Assist students with understanding psychology as a science and inform them about the British Psychological Society, which is the representative body for students, graduates and chartered members.
- Prepare students for the type of content they should expect to receive across their degree course and how this links in with the core requirements of the British Psychological Society.
- Encourage thought and reflection around the study skills required at each level of study and the gradual shift to autonomous learning as students progress through their psychology degree.

INTRODUCTION

As you embark on your psychology degree, your knowledge of the subject core components and approaches will probably be limited. Through a greater understanding of the perspectives your degree will cover, you can feel prepared for what is coming your way and start to think about the importance of each approach. They will all form important building blocks in your journey to successful completion of your degree.

PSYCHOLOGY AS A SOCIAL AND BIOLOGICAL SCIENCE

There are different nuances between attempts to try and summarise the discipline of psychology, yet the commonly agreed definition refers to psychology as being the scientific study of human mind and behaviour. This involves us ‘thinking about thinking’ and throughout this book you will be asked to reflect on yourself and develop appreciation for the need to be self-aware as a psychology student and beyond in your future journey. Through understanding more about the mind and how it works, psychology will help you to explore the impact that this has on the way we all behave and covers topics such as communication, memory, thought and emotion. Psychology is a vast subject and through understanding more about people, we can get a better understanding of how we can tackle some of the key issues in society because it is applicable to any situation involving people.

As a psychology student, it is important to think ahead towards employability skills and jobs that you may go into post-graduation. An understanding of people is likely to be an advantage in any area and employers recognise the strong skill sets that psychology graduates possess as a result of their degree studies.

Psychology is a discipline based on scientific principles and utilises scientific enquiry throughout. This means that there is a strong evidence base to the creation of new knowledge. Psychology uses a theoretical base to generate further research questions and aims to provide answers to questions by employing rigorous research methods. On your psychology degree, the knowledge, skills and appreciation of research methods will be embedded throughout your studies across every module, with some specific modules being solely focused on research methods.

TABLE 1.1 The structure and content of a typical psychology degree

TYPE OF PSYCHOLOGY	CORE KNOWLEDGE AREA	TOPIC
Academic Psychology	The History of Psychology	Conceptual & Historical Psychology
	Biological Psychology	Genetics & Evolutionary Psychology
		Neuroscience, Brain & Behaviour
	Cognitive Psychology	Memory
		Learning
		Language & Thought
		Sensation & Perception
		Consciousness
	Developmental Psychology	Cognitive Development
		Emotional Development
		Social Development
	Individual Differences	Motivation
		Emotion
		Intelligence
		Personality
Mental Health & Psychopathology		
Social Psychology	Social Cognition & Attitudes	
	Interpersonal, Group & Intergroup Processes	
Research Methods	Research Methods	
	Statistics	
Applied Psychology	Clinical Psychology	
	Health Psychology	
	Forensic Psychology	
	Educational Psychology	
	Occupational Psychology	
	Sports & Exercise Psychology	
	Counselling Psychology	
	Environmental Psychology	
	Consumer Psychology	
	Community Psychology	

Table 1.1 lists the kinds of topics you are likely to encounter in a typical psychology degree. The topics listed next to Academic Psychology would be the kinds of topics taught on most Psychology degree courses in the UK, and make up the core knowledge areas recommended by the British Psychological Society. The Applied Psychology topics are ones that may often be taught at

undergraduate level, but also represent areas of Professional Psychology training which are usually taught at postgraduate level.

Now we have established psychology as a science, we can break this down further and consider it as being both a biological and a social science. Psychology as a biological science studies the biology of behaviour and you may hear it referred to as *physiological psychology*. This approach is concerned with the biological causes of behaviour and will explore the nervous system, hormones and genetics. It aims to examine thoughts, feelings and behaviour through a physiological and ultimately physical perspective. Across your degree you will study modules which are specific to this approach and learn how the scientific method is employed, whilst learning more about the human body and processes which may have psychological impacts on a person.

This brief overview of psychology as a science has set up the key debate which echoes through all areas of psychology and will form key learning and discussions across your degree. This is what we term the 'Nature-Nurture debate'. Ultimately it asks the questions about those genetic factors which may be of influence (nature) and those social factors which may influence a person from outside of their body (nurture); or another way to put it is to ask whether the behaviours of interest are innate or acquired. This is a debate which has no clear answer and whilst some psychologists will have their own clear perspectives and strong opinions from their evidence base, others will contest them. You will find a multitude of research findings, academic debates and interesting reading around this issue and you may want to start considering your own perspective from the beginning of your course, looking at the evidence on both sides and reflecting on the interplay between both influences (see Self-reflection Point 1.1 below). Indeed, contemporary psychologists rarely take a one sided approach to their knowledge generation and understanding; more so, the current position is to explore the interaction between both sides of the debate and how the different factors culminate to help us understand more about behaviour.



SELF-REFLECTION POINT 1.1

The Nature-Nurture Debate

Take a moment to consider where you stand on the nature-nurture debate at the moment. Is a person born to behave in a certain way or pre-disposed to certain behaviours? Do they behave in the way they do due to influences of others around them and their circumstances? Could it be a combination of the two approaches?

Thinking about the kind of people you may want to work with in the future, why is this an important debate to be able to see both sides of?



EXERCISE 1.1

Find two pieces of reading which support nature and two pieces which support nurture.

How did reading these impact on your initial opinion above? Did it strengthen it, or did it make you see things from another perspective?

THE BRITISH PSYCHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

As Psychology is such a diverse and applied science it is important that it is regulated and that high standards are maintained at all levels. This is where the British Psychology Society (BPS) comes in as they are the representative body for psychology and psychologists in the UK. The Society promotes excellence and is concerned with the application of psychology for the greater public good; this covers education, research and training, ensuring that psychological knowledge is disseminated for the good of everyone. The BPS embraces equality, diversity and inclusion throughout its work, and has a role to play in preparing you for the wider workforce or postgraduate study on completion of your psychology degree.

If you require general information about psychology which is not specific to the requirements of your degree course, then your first port of call may be the BPS website (www.bps.org.uk/). This has a range of resources and interactive content which will signpost you to your areas of interest and includes content such as *psychology careers*, *relevant events* which are open to you and links to the latest *research and news*. There are specific areas for members, and student membership is open to you, to enhance your identity as a psychology student and enhance materials available to you. The BPS also has a strong social media presence and you may want to consider following them on your favourite apps to ensure you are kept up to date on what is happening across the discipline.

The BPS publishes a number of journals and a monthly magazine called *The Psychologist* is available to members. This has a diverse readership and includes areas of interest across the entire subject area. Beyond this, one of the main functions of the Society is to provide standards and guidelines and these will be applied across your psychology degree and embedded throughout your learning. An example of this is the *BPS Code of Ethics* which will be explored later in this chapter and throughout this book. Ethical practice should be applied across your studies and when considering your future career options.

How is the BPS involved in your psychology degree?

The BPS website allows you to search for accredited Psychology courses at both undergraduate and post-graduate levels (www.bps.org.uk/public/become-psychologist/accredited-courses), and this is useful information if you are planning to go on to further study. If you wish to pursue a career as a psychologist or become part of the wider psychological workforce then it is necessary to take a psychology degree which is accredited by the BPS. Your accredited degree will allow you to progress to the next stage of training and ensure you have the appropriate skills and knowledge required, whichever specialism you may wish to focus on. If your psychology undergraduate degree is accredited by the BPS, then their partnership and accreditation team will have supported the academic team in the development, quality checking and maintenance of high standards in curriculum content and delivery. This ensures that you are receiving the core psychology content that you require should you wish to progress to the next stage in your psychology training route. The BPS accredit courses as they are developed but are constantly involved in advising course teams when revisions and improvements are made to your curriculum. After all, the world is changing and contemporary delivery methods and applications to the real world need to be catered for; new job roles are emerging and the knowledge and training which psychology students receive needs to reflect this. The BPS reviews any major proposed changes and ensures the standards are still met and that the changes are not detrimental to the quality of course delivery.

WHAT SHOULD I EXPECT IN A PSYCHOLOGY DEGREE?

You are on your journey, an exciting yet challenging one and the years of your degree study may turn out to be some of the most memorable of your life. Try not to compare yourselves to others around you on your course or others who have previously studied a degree. Whilst comparisons are natural, they are often unhelpful and you need to remember that it is your journey and you will take the route best for you, to help you achieve your goals. Comparisons with others can add pressure, self-doubt and your focus is best placed on what it is you want to get out of your degree, your goals, your future plans and your most effective learning strategies.

A psychology degree entails a diverse range of modules with wide ranging topics and psychological perspectives. Each approach will add to your understanding of human mind and behaviour but will also likely challenge you and your way of thinking. You will also find that the perspectives may challenge each other in trying to account for the same phenomenon, yet that is the beauty of the discipline; there are rarely firm answers provided, as we are dealing with human beings. It is important to emphasise that the different approaches (for example, biological or social) provide knowledge of behaviour at different levels of explanation and so are not mutually exclusive forms of explanation, but are complementary.

Now the role of the BPS has been explored and it is understood how it has helped to shape your degree, it is essential that you take time to understand the structure and choices in your course of study. All accredited courses will contain the core psychological content, yet you will find variations in the order, delivery style and focus of some courses as they will each have their own strengths. Therefore, you may be on a different psychology course to your friends and may not be studying the same things at the same time or in the same way. Different courses will also have different option modules available and so more information is provided below about how your three levels of academic study may look. Your academic course team will be able to help you with any questions that you have about your specific course and how you progress through the years of study on your degree.



REAL LIFE PERSPECTIVE 1.1

What I Wish I'd Known at the Outset of my Degree

Current psychology students at the University of Bolton were asked to reflect on what they wished they had known as they started their psychology degree:

'That it would give me so much more than a degree in psychology. I have gained personal development I never expected including more self-esteem'

'How challenging and rewarding it would be'

'I wish I had known how university would test and build my resilience'

'To believe in my ability and not listen to the self-doubt'

They then offered future psychology students some words of advice as they start out on their journeys:

‘Do not delay anything. Make sure you ask for any clarification that you need to know when the instructions are given. Keep yourself well organised – make clear notes, schedule your time for work, socialising, sleeping, etc. Do not forget about your mental hygiene’

‘Challenge yourself and keep an open mind, ask yourself, “but what if?”. This has aided me tremendously in increasing my knowledge and wider research abilities. Additionally, plan and organise a set time to study’

‘If you work hard, it will pay off’

‘Never give up, be organised and have a plan of action’

First year of the psychology degree: Building the foundations

There is no requirement for students embarking on a psychology degree to have studied the subject previously, which tends to result in a mixture of knowledge and experience across the first year cohort of students. For example, some students may have studied psychology at GCSE or A level, some may have studied psychological components within their Access to Higher Education courses or others may have taken a foundation year as part of a four-year course. Yet it is equally valid if students have no prior knowledge of psychology and are starting their degree with a blank canvas as they bring with them skills and knowledge from their different areas of study and work experiences.

This may mean that you look around and feel that others know more than you if they have studied psychology and you have not, but there is no need to worry. Whichever camp you fall into is absolutely fine, and the first year of your degree will challenge you as well as support you. The main aim of this year is to act as a foundation for the whole degree course and to ensure a level playing field for all so that those who have not studied psychology can become equipped with key approaches, theories and relevant content as they become familiar with university study requirements. Those that have studied it can start to expand their knowledge.

FAQ 1.1



What is Graduate Basis for Chartership (GBC) and How Do I Achieve It?

When studying on an accredited Psychology degree, you are working towards ‘graduate basis for chartership’ (GBC). GBC is a standard in psychology, set by the BPS and it demonstrates attainment of knowledge of core psychology subjects. It will often be a requirement for further study on psychology postgraduate courses.

In order to reach this standard you must:

- Pass the empirical psychology project which you complete in your final year
- Gain at least a lower second class honours degree (often referred to as a 2:2), or its equivalent.

(Continued)

This chapter will set the scene for your final year psychology project and so you have an idea as to what you are working towards. Remember, your course will have prepared you with the necessary knowledge and skills to conduct this research and you will have a strong appreciation of scientific enquiry, which will be embedded throughout your modules.

The BPS specifies key core areas which must be covered in your course content in order that you can receive graduate basis for chartership (GBC). Much of this core content will be delivered in depth across your second and third years of studies, but you will be introduced to the range of approaches within your first year to help set the stage for what is to come. It may help if you think of it like building a house – in order to develop strong knowledge, critical appraisal and skills to be able to apply the theory to practice, it is essential you have the firm foundations. Your first year of study can be compared to the foundation blocks, whereby engaging with all of the lectures, seminars, workshops and additional university support sessions can give you the head start you need to progress through the higher academic levels of study. Therefore, the more time and effort that you invest at this stage and the more you practise the new skills required for independent study, the more benefits you will see as you work to become a more independent student. This will entail additional time allocation outside of that scheduled to supplement the content provided in your lectures. You may wish to clarify what you've learnt with your lecturers and so your study time may involve additional tutorials and beyond this you may want to draw on support from your peers to set up study groups to help you develop learning environments outside of university.

The core curriculum is specified in the second year of your study, but you are advised to really look out for these areas throughout your first year. Alongside the introduction to these areas, it is probable that your university will start from day one in supporting you to look ahead to your future. You may think that this seems rather premature but the more you understand about the wide ranging directions that a psychology degree can take you in, the more you can consider this as you develop your new skills and get opportunities to see how they can be applied to the real world. Studying for a degree is no longer simply about the qualification gained at the end, but also about gaining transferable skills and particularly those that will help you develop into a graduate, well placed to go into the work area of your choice. You may therefore have more practical applied modules built into your curriculum within your first year, which will help you consider the application of psychological theory to yourself and your practice as well as to the wider world and workforce. For example, your course may have a module entitled 'applications of psychology' in which you may consider the different professional routes in psychology careers, the application of psychology to developing your own skills and the diverse way in which psychology can be applied to the wider workforce. Other applied modules may consider 'contemporary issues in psychology' and apply the core psychological theories you are learning about to current issues, news stories or topical debates to help you recognise how psychology aids our understanding of the wider world. If you get the opportunity to listen to external speakers during your university career, either within your modules or as added value events, then please do take advantage of these and keep your minds open to avenues you may have never previously considered.

The first year of study also gives you the chance to consider *historical issues in psychology* and how an understanding of human mind and behaviour evolved. As time has progressed, earlier research and

understanding has been challenged and part of the progressive nature of the discipline is to recognise how things have moved on and why there is often a need to do things differently in current research and practice. Through exploring historical issues in psychology, we can celebrate the successes, but also debate the classic weaknesses in psychology experiments and cultural assumptions made.

The other main area which you will be introduced to within your first year of studies is that of *research methods* and this is an essential thread which will run through your degree course. As stated previously, one of the key components to the discipline is scientific enquiry, involving the gathering of evidence, answering research questions and adding new knowledge. Therefore, research skills are a key part of understanding this. Your degree will gradually develop your ability in this area, from learning the basics, to devising, administering and writing up your own study. Research methods will help you develop your ability to think critically about research findings, help you understand different approaches to collecting and analysing data and be in a position to apply your skills through active involvement in workshops and study groups. By the end of the first year you should feel an increase in confidence and self-efficacy, realising that you have made it through your first year modules and assessments and are well on your way to achieving your longer-term goals.

FAQ 1.2



I Have Never Studied Research Methods Before and my Previous Subjects are not Psychology Related so I am Worried I May Struggle With This. It Feels Scary, Will I be Supported in This New Learning?

Many students will come onto their course with no experience of psychology and will have a diverse range of subject expertise, which may well be arts based rather than scientific. This is absolutely fine, and all students will be fully supported regardless of previous knowledge. It is assumed that everyone is starting from the beginning and your research methods modules will provide you with the resources and teaching you need to help you develop knowledge across the area.

In addition to the more formal taught elements through lectures, you will be given the opportunity to practise your research skills through practical workshops and seminars. These will help you make sense of the theory covered and let you apply the processes to real examples to contextualise your learning.

As long as you put the time and effort in by attending all classes and completing your independent study through your additional reading and practice of the taught skills, you will give yourself every opportunity to really shine. Many students start these modules with some anxiety and apprehension and later realise that they have quickly become their favourites!

Second year of the psychology degree: Core curriculum

Commencing the second year of study of your course should be an exciting time as you have the foundations to build on and by this time you should be settled into university life and have a clearer understanding of both the general university processes and expectations of you as a psychology student. The second year of study sees a shift to more independent study and greater emphasis will be

placed on your analysis and evaluative skills. Before this point, you will have been used to explaining research findings and theories and should be well skilled in describing them and their key features. Your second year of academic study requires you to become critical and move beyond simple description of theory in isolation but to explore it and use a critical lens when reviewing core knowledge. Focus Box 1.1 provides more information on this with some key tips on how you may start to do this.



FOCUS BOX 1.1

Critical Analysis

To help you develop your skills in this area it is important for you to be able to reflect and review your work so that you can check-in with any progress made and what is still required. When you are completing your reading after your lectures, try and remember to actively read and make sense of the resources you've been given. This can then translate into your own work and preparation for assessments. The main thing to think about after your reading or writing is to ask yourself the question, 'So What?':

- What is the point of the resource?
- What does it add to knowledge/understanding/theory?
- Which sources does it support/contradict?
- How can the findings be applied outside of their original context?
- What are the trends in that area?
- How do findings compare cross-culturally?
- Where are the gaps in literature?
- How does the psychological theory relate to the real world?

This list is not exhaustive, and you can add your own 'so what?' questions to it, but the more you develop your independent thinking, the more you will read to try and satisfy your curiosity and the more developed your arguments and critical analysis will become.

The following provides you with a breakdown of the curriculum which is required to be delivered in an accredited undergraduate psychology course to provide students with the Graduate Basis for Chartership (GBC). As introduced previously, different psychology degrees will organise these areas in different ways to provide a logical progression throughout the course of study. For many modules it will be clear from their titles which area they cover, yet some modules may cover more than one core area, and some may be more creative in terms of how they embed the approaches through their curriculum. For example, you may have an introductory module in the first year which focuses on an introduction to both cognitive and biopsychological perspectives and then there may be a more in-depth focused module on each areas separately in the second year. Each module will have a module guide, containing key learning outcomes, indicative content and further specifications about the delivery and assessment of that module. It is that module guide which will keep you on track as you study each area and help you ensure that your independent reading is well aligned to the outcomes which you need to achieve.

The Graduate Basis for Chartership (GBC) curriculum, as recommended and monitored by the BPS in partnership with the academic teams is as follows:

1. **Conceptual and historical issues in psychology.** This term is often abbreviated to CHIP, so be aware if you hear this acronym. This prepares students for the study of psychology as a science and as the broad title suggests, it informs students about historical developments in psychology. It explores the key underpinnings of the discipline and how the historical paradigms and models have evolved. CHIP necessitates the inclusion of ethical, conceptual, cultural and historical aspects across the core curriculum areas. Therefore, CHIP should feature throughout your degree as a thread running through it, yet there will be specific modules where this becomes the focus of module content and assessment. Through exploring these key areas, you will develop a stronger understanding and appreciation of the social and cultural construction of psychology and develop your ability to make critical comparisons across multiple perspectives. This gives students a greater ability to debate the political and ethical issues in psychology, and through this developed understanding, you can begin to apply psychological theory to real world issues.
2. **Biological psychology.** This topic is relevant to the ‘nature’ side of the big nature–nurture debate we explored earlier and is concerned with the biological basis of human and also non-human animal behaviour. For example, within this area you will explore the influence of hormones on behaviour and consider behavioural genetics. This presents the opportunity to understand more about the role of genetics and the environment and how the two operate to affect behaviour. Through your biological psychology modules, you will learn about the connection between physical responses to psychological problems through advancing your understanding of *neuroscience*. This is the scientific study of the nervous system and you will explore the relationship between the brain and behaviour, learning about a range of laboratory equipment and ways of testing these links, and you may have chance to use equipment in the labs to further your knowledge. Within the area of biological psychology you will also be introduced to typical and atypical neuropsychology and will explore comparative and evolutionary psychology. Many of these terms may be unfamiliar to you at this stage and do not worry, as they will be taught with the assumption of no prior knowledge.
3. **Social psychology.** This branch of psychology is best aligned to the nurture side of our ‘nature–nurture’ debate and in most cases sees our behaviour as being learnt rather than being inbuilt. This explores a range of external factors that may be at play which can help explain behaviour, particularly when there are other people or social factors that can influence us. This approach introduces you to social cognition, and the factors around us that can affect us and how we attribute meaning and value to things. Social Psychology encourages us to think about the people around us and how they influence our decision making and behaviour; this helps us to understand about inter-group relations, group identity, and attributes such as leadership and altruism. Key threads which will run through this learning will relate to culture and what this entails for groups of people and also how close relationships can be explained, with a constant need to consider how an individual’s interaction with the world around them gives meaning to them (social constructionism).

4. **Cognitive psychology.** This branch of psychology is concerned with what is going on in people's minds and ultimately it is the scientific study of the mind as an information processor. Remember, core psychology content is covered in order to give students breadth and depth to their psychological knowledge and to provide an appreciation of both the disparities and agreements between different theoretical approaches. Therefore, on some psychology courses, students are introduced to both biopsychological and cognitive approaches within the same introductory modules and this core knowledge can be developed in your second year so you can hit the ground running. The core content you can expect to receive in courses on cognitive psychology are topics such as attention, perception, memory, learning, problem solving and decision making. In essence this module forces you to think about your thinking (metacognition) and the processes that are occurring within the brain to help you deal with incoming information. You will also explore language acquisition and production, consciousness and cognitive neuropsychology; here you will be able to apply your previous learning about the structure and function of the brain and how these relate to specific cognitive psychological processes.
5. **Individual differences.** This branch of psychology places emphasis on individuals differing in their behaviour and personal qualities and is concerned with how and why individuals' psychological traits differ. Diversity is key when taking this approach as we can all be guilty of grouping people together, yet through considering and embracing differences across people in a range of areas we can develop a better understanding of the application of theory to practice. Examples of these differences may relate to gender, personality, attitudes and intelligence yet these are only the tip of the iceberg. The concept of individual differences will be embedded across all modules because by our very nature we are all unique. Your course will have modules where these differences are the main concerns and will have distinctive ways of exploring these and helping you understand them across a range of contexts. You will study personality and intelligence, critiquing the specific contributions of psychologists in attempting to measure these through psychological tools and psychometric assessments. Through your understanding of cognitive approaches, you will also be able to explore differences in peoples' cognitive styles and consider a broad range of areas such as emotion, motivation, mood and positive psychology.
6. **Developmental psychology.** This branch of psychology will help you understand how people develop in terms of a range of key components right across the lifespan – from babies through to older adults with a range of developmental stages in between. This will not only explore typical development across the different life stages, but also consider atypical development so that this can be linked to developmental problems and offer psychological theories as to why these may arise. Topics introduced within this module will include social interaction and development, developmental stages, attachment and emotion, theory of mind and lifespan development.
7. **Research methods.** Research methods is an area which permeates every module of study of a psychology degree course. As we know, psychology as a science necessitates a rigorous scientific approach to generating new knowledge and research methods provide the skills to ensure psychological studies are completed in a robust and objective manner. Knowledge of research methods is necessary to fully understand most other topics in psychology and will be an important requirement when it comes to tackling the final year project.

FOCUS BOX 1.2**What Research Methods Skills Will I Learn?**

Throughout the psychology degree, your modules, teaching and workshops are intended to develop some of the following skills. These show you what you can achieve by the end of your degree so long as you put the hard work and independent study in, in addition to your formal lectures and workshops.

By the end of your degree you should be able to:

- Develop an understanding of a range of psychological research methods and be able to apply multiple perspectives to psychological issues, using theory and evidence.
- Identify and evaluate patterns in behaviour, psychological functioning and experience.
- Generate and explore hypotheses and research questions drawing on relevant theory and research.
- Carry out empirical studies involving a variety of methods of data collection, including experiments, observation, questionnaires, interviews and focus groups.
- Analyse, present and evaluate quantitative and qualitative data and evaluate research findings.
- Employ evidence-based reasoning and examine practical, theoretical and ethical issues associated with the range of methodologies.
- Use a variety of psychological tools, including specialist software, laboratory equipment and psychometric instruments.
- Apply psychological knowledge ethically and safely to real world problems.
- Critically evaluate psychological theory and research.

(BPS, 2021)

Third year of the psychology degree**Introduction to what can be expected in the final year**

Embarking on your third year of the psychology degree means that you have shown strong understanding of psychological theories, built on your critical analysis skills and have breadth and depth to your appreciation of different approaches to the scientific study of human mind and behaviour. Now you are ready to develop your skills even further, work towards more independence in your approach to study, and become more autonomous in how you apply this knowledge to areas which are of specific interest to you. At this stage you will be thinking ahead to the next stage in your life after graduation and the third year gives you the chance to consolidate and build on your learning and also to tailor your degree more to your future aims and goals in a number of ways.

Third year modules, and particularly those optional modules available, may be of a more applied nature as students have the core theoretical psychological knowledge and now it is about making it more specialised and applied to specific areas of interest to professional training routes or developing more practical skills. Some courses may have opportunities for work based on practical experience built within them so that you can accrue hours away from the classroom and use the experience to

apply psychological theories into real-world practice. One example of such a module is 'applied experience' where students will gain experience working in an area which is relevant to their future goals and will help them develop transferable skills. This will require the development of reflective practice in order to set personal developmental objectives on which to work. These experiential modules will require a greater need for independence and often require students to be proactive in securing experience using existing university networks. If offered, these opportunities are a valuable addition to courses and afford students the opportunity to develop practical skills, build up evidence for their CVs and future interviews, as well as testing out their suitability and enjoyment of different working environments/clients/roles.

The final year of study allows students to further develop their critical analysis skills and to really think about what their next steps are going to be. Some students will have an academic pathway in mind whereby they want to go straight into postgraduate level study, whereas others will be eager to get into the job market and secure a role where they can put their theoretical learning into practice. Within the final year of study, it is essential that you continue to reflect and be aware of your personal goals and skills, and what you wish to accomplish within the remaining time of your studies and beyond. The importance of critical reflection skills are further emphasised in Chapter 2, as mastering these will help you keep check of yourself and where you want to be. This links in with academic skills, employability skills and ways to improve your life with your knowledge of psychology, which are all explored in detail throughout the remainder of this book.

Research dissertation

The dissertation module is completed in the final year of the degree and usually accrues the credits for a double module, signifying the importance of this in any student's overall degree. The name of this module may differ across universities and it may be referred to as final year research project, or honours project (as it is usually the successful completion of this which allows you to claim your honours degree).

Many students see this as the most important part of their degree, the challenge they have been striving for since the day they started their psychology studies, and the pinnacle of their achievements. This is where you draw upon your newly found psychology knowledge and hone in on a specific area of interest. Here students work under the supervision of an appropriate academic member of staff and following a thorough review of the literature, recognise a gap or area for further exploration, from which they develop a research question and devise appropriate methodology to answer this question. The project is usually a novel study in which students typically collect original empirical data from participants using an appropriate methodology. Through critical exploration of the findings, they can consider the wider implications and make recommendations for future research focus. It is important that throughout the course of their project that they show their understanding of ethical guidelines and demonstrate their ability to resolve ethical issues should they arise.

The research dissertation may take many formats: (1) *Quantitative*, where you collect numerical data and use statistical packages to help you accept or reject your hypotheses, or (2) a *Qualitative* approach, where you may be interested in the experiences of people and want to explore more individualised data where you may conduct interviews with participants. Data are usually collected by the

student themselves, but under guidance of a supervisor, you may systematically select secondary data which already exists and apply your research questions to that. For example, you may be interested in exploring how people with mental illness use social media for support, so rather than asking participants directly, you may use existing data through publicly available social media posts. Like all research, this requires full research ethical approval to be obtained before data collection, as explored later in this chapter.

Where to start with your project?

This may seem like a daunting task, although your university degree will set you up with the skills, knowledge and tools to be able to complete this by taking on the role of a more independent researcher. Remember the idea of your earlier modules providing the foundations to your degree? Well, if you remember to appreciate the importance of this then you will be well equipped to take on this challenge. Whilst there is no need to know what you want to focus on in your project from the beginning of your studies, it does you no harm to have this in the back of your mind as you progress through your first and second years. You may want to reflect on which modules or specific lectures excite you the most. Which areas inspired you to go and do more independent reading. Or which lectures left you with lots of unanswered questions that you could not wait to discuss with others or research further.

As you progress through your earlier years of your degree you will have studied research methods, so the more time and effort you put into these modules, the more it will help you feel prepared to take on your own project. Rather than just learning about research methods at a superficial level and knowing for example which buttons to push on the statistics software programme to get the outcomes you need, try and really think about what the purpose is of each stage of your research procedure. By taking time to really understand the mechanisms behind each part of the research journey, you will develop the knowledge to apply it to any type of research project, whatever your subject of interest and whatever your methodology.

As a psychology student, it is likely you will be asked to participate in a number of research projects throughout your years of study. You are encouraged to take up this opportunity and see what different forms the research takes, as not only is participation a key learning opportunity, in many cases, this is requirement of the course. It may be that you are asked to complete a questionnaire, and this could be a physical questionnaire handed out in class, or increasingly more likely, an online questionnaire which is accessed through email or social media accounts. Other studies may require you to take part in an intervention or even go into the labs and perform tasks under certain experimental conditions. The more you expose yourself to these studies, the more ideas you will have about different ways to approach your potential research question.

Why is the research project so important?

As discussed previously, you need to successfully complete the research project to enable you to achieve GBC status with the BPS, so is essential for anyone who would like to progress their studies and continue training along one of the professional routes. Beyond this, the research project helps

you to develop a range of transferable skills which are going to assist you in the future regardless of your specific career goals.

Should you wish to progress to postgraduate study, there will be a need for research skills, and these will be taught and assessed at the next level of academic study, so having the skills at your final year of undergraduate study is essential. Completing a research project requires you to have research knowledge but beyond that you will develop your ability to problem solve, analyse, discuss findings and contribute to knowledge in a logical and systematic way. In addition, it is likely that throughout your project you will work on personal attributes that can help you succeed, including confidence, independence in academic study, resilience and adaptability. It is rare in research that the journey goes exactly as planned at the beginning and often things crop up which create challenges, requiring the need to think about things flexibly and not be afraid to make changes. The research project submission marks the final stages or even the end of the degree and this encapsulates the learning from your course and reflects the progress you have made. When you get to this stage you may want to look back at some of the assignments you completed in your first year and feel proud at how far you have come.

Choosing your optional modules

As students progress through their degree, they will have the opportunity to elect which optional modules they wish to undertake as part of their studies. The number of optional modules will be different across courses, as it is dependent upon how the core optional modules are organised but also on the named degree being taken. Some psychology degrees are more general in name for example BSc (Hons) Psychology and therefore will offer a greater number and choice of options, whereby others have more specified named awards such as BSc (Hons) Criminological and Forensic Psychology or BSc (Hons) Psychology, Psychotherapy and Counselling. If you are enrolled on a course that has a specific focus you will probably need to take specific modules in the third year that are an integral part of that degree course. For example, a forensic-related degree is likely to have a pre-defined module in each year which is specific to the areas such as psychology and crime, the psychology of law and justice and applications of forensic psychology. These modules would need to be taken in order to pass that degree and are non-negotiable for students enrolled on that course.

Students who are studying on BSc (Hons) Psychology will likely receive a wider choice and greater number of optional modules throughout their degree courses and this is where some careful thinking is required. You may want to find out about these prior to starting your course so you have an idea of what may be available to you. That said, by the nature of optional modules, these may change during your time on the course as this allows the academic team to keep the offering current to contemporary areas of psychology, and optional modules may also reflect the specific expertise of your academic teams.

What should I think about when selecting optional modules?

Students are advised to take heed of the previous warning about refraining from making comparisons to others. The degree and direction this will take you is something that will be unique to you and your goals, so you are urged to take time to stop and think when selecting optional modules to consider your goals and interests. Social psychological perspectives show us that our decision making and

choices can be influenced by others around us and this application is no exception; it is likely that you will ask your friends which options they are picking and ideally you may want to stay with them as you may have created effective study groups and a strong support network. Yet selecting an optional module because others are studying that is not advised; you really need to think about where your interests lie and what your goals are for the future. Please do not be tempted to pick an optional module because of the scheduling of that module, so do not let time of day influence your decision or similarly what building you may be taught in. These are not the most important considerations when reaching your decision.

Instead, students are urged to think about the areas of psychology that they particularly enjoy, the approaches which they find themselves wanting to read more about and the topics that excite them. The message should be clear by now that beyond the taught formal lectures and workshops, students are expected to complete a wide range of independent reading and study to help them contextualise the key learning from the taught sessions. Therefore, really ensure that you pick modules which you want to learn more about and that spark your interest, creating a desire to learn more. If you pick a module based on external factors then your motivation may wain and it will become increasingly more difficult to complete your independent study to the standard required to achieve your academic goals.

So, now you have thought about the topics and areas of psychology that interest you, you can start to think about what it would be like learning about those topics each week and check out the module specification for an idea of the detailed content. It is now suggested that you stop and think and consider your future goals and which modules may be more closely aligned to those. For example, if you would like to go on and work towards becoming an occupational psychologist and there were elective modules around psychometric testing, business psychology or organisational psychology then it would be wise to ensure you selected one or more of those. At this stage in your studies/career you may wish to specify particular relevance of modules of study on your CV, to show your knowledge and skills in this area.

It is also advisable to consider the assessment strategies for the optional modules and take time to seek out this information before making your choice. For example, if a module has a consultancy report as an assessment and this is something you may be required to do in your future career role then consider this option. It may be that you feel less confident in presenting information to others and one module has a presentation embedded within the assessment stage. Rather than avoiding this, reflect on the advantages of taking on this challenge and embracing the opportunity so that you have practice and feel better equipped for that interview for your dream job where you will very likely be required to present to the selection panel.

It should be clear by now that there are a number of key factors to consider when selecting these modules and that nobody can make a better decision for you than you can for yourself. Try and really take the time to get this right and think about where your learning would be best placed and where skill development can be maximised through the choice of options you have. Please remember that whichever options you pick, you are not disadvantaging yourself in any way as all students on BPS accredited courses will have received similar core psychological content to reach the accreditation standards. It is the optional modules which allow flexibility for personal choices, interests and future plans and where you can really shine through applying your learnt knowledge of core topics to more specialist areas.



SELF-REFLECTION POINT 1.2

What Should I Ask Myself When Picking my Optional Modules?

Take a few moments to stop and think about your current areas of interest in psychology and what your current goals are. These may well change over the course of your degree but self-reflection should be a constant process where you can revisit these questions as you undertake your academic journey.

1. Which areas of psychology have I enjoyed the most so far?
2. Where are my gaps in knowledge that I would like to address?
3. Which skills would I like to further develop over my course and how can the available options help me do this?
4. What are my goals for the future in terms of further study or employment?
5. Which options are going to be the most use to me in helping me achieve my future goals?

Research and professional ethics

Understanding of ethics and the application of ethical principles to both research and practice is essential for anyone studying psychology. The understanding of ethical considerations will be embedded within every stage of your psychology degree from the moment you start your studies, and this will be evident throughout every module, your module assessments, your work-based learning opportunities and your research reports and final year dissertation.

At the end of this chapter there is some key reading which links to the *BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct*, and you can expect to receive teaching around this document and any relevant supplementary ethical guidelines produced by the BPS. You will notice from the title of this section that ethics is considered in a dual manner, with both research ethics and professional ethics paramount and so both will be embedded throughout your courses.

Research ethics

As you learn more about psychology and explore the different theoretical approaches, you will be introduced to key research studies often conducted many decades ago. For some of these studies, replication would not be possible today as they would not satisfy the requirements of sound ethical practise and would be deemed unethical. For example, you will learn about research conducted on monkeys to try and find out more about attachment, or about inducing fear in children, or even research studying obedience by making participants think they were administering a fatal shock to others. After all, things change all the time and what was acceptable historically, may not be deemed appropriate at a later date. There are many components to sound ethical practice in research but ultimately, the safety and wellbeing of the participants is paramount and no psychological research should be conducted by students if there is a risk of harm to the participant beyond that encountered in everyday life. The ethical code of conduct is there to protect research participants and ensure that

processes are transparent, and the research is being conducted in a robust professional way. Your degree course will have mechanisms in place to ensure that all student research which involves human participants is conducted in line with the Society's Code of Human Research Ethics.

Research should be able to add to the knowledge base and there needs to be a clear purpose and research questions to be answered, ensuring a rationale for it and that the proposal is grounded on existing knowledge. Participants should be clearly informed about the study and assured that their participation is voluntary and they will remain anonymous in any dissemination of research findings. Beyond that, participants should be informed that their data will remain confidential within the research team and informed about the time period within which they have the right to withdraw. In some situations the true aim of the research cannot be shared with the participants in advance and in this case deception may be required, which despite the connotations of the word, this may well be deemed ethical. For example, if a researcher wanted to explore the impact of advertising, they may ask participants to watch a component of a TV show and they may be asked questions about this, while the researcher is really interested in what happens in the middle when the adverts are shown. Where the true nature of the study cannot be revealed because this may invalidate the results, participants will normally be debriefed about the deception after the study to make sure they understand the true purpose and that no harm was caused as a result of their participation.

Within research methods modules, you will be required to write research reports and through these, will need to show consideration of ethical issues throughout. You may be asked to present a research project, or a research proposal and again ethical considerations will be vital in this process. As you commence your final year and are asked to start planning your research dissertation, you will need to satisfy an ethics committee that your research proposal meets all ethical requirements and only once this is approved will you be granted permission to start collecting your data. Failure to comply with this will have serious consequences and breach of ethical practice may even mean that you are unable to complete your degree. As a student, it is your responsibility to ensure you are abiding by the ethical guidelines and your academic team will ensure that these are very clear to you throughout your degree course.

Having read this and the importance of ethical practice, you should not worry at this stage about not fully understanding the codes or key frameworks which you will need to work within as these will be introduced throughout your course by your academic team. Your psychology degree will include formal teaching on ethics and at each level of academic study you will be provided with exercises designed to help you understand appropriate ethical principles. This will not only help you to understand the ethical frameworks which apply specifically to the research you are planning to carry out, but also understand the ethical implications of the research which you are reading and learning about.

Professional ethics

As well as understanding ethical principles applied to psychological research it is important that students also understand ethics as applied to working with people more generally. As previously explored in this chapter, the BPS has a key role as the professional body for psychology. During your degree course, you will learn about the distinct role of the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) which is the statutory regulator for practitioner psychologists in the UK. As prospective

psychologists, there is a need for students to understand the legislative and regulatory requirements that apply to psychological practice in the UK. After all, psychologists will likely face many challenging situations and will have clear ethical principles, values and standards on which to base their professional conduct.

It is important that students on accredited psychology courses do not simply concern themselves with research ethics, but also appreciate the wider application of ethical principles. As a student, you will be supported in developing your ability to recognise where an ethical issue may be present, to identify relevant ethical issues and consider appropriate actions, making decisions about your intentions, and then implementing such ethical considerations to remove potential issues. Beyond these, there are a number of key specified ethical principles which as a psychology student you will be required to develop your commitment to meeting. These include the principles of respect, competence, responsibility and integrity and these will be explored throughout your course at different stages, appropriate to your level of study. The BPS describe these ethical principles by a statement of key values and these are accompanied by a set of standards in their Code of Ethics. When a psychology degree course contains a work-based learning module, these principles will be essential and ethical practice will be embedded in related teaching and workshops.



WHAT HAVE I LEARNT?

- Psychology is both a social and biological science and takes an empirical approach to the development of new knowledge and practice.
- The British Psychological Society (BPS) plays a key role in the development and support of the psychology degree courses and has a range of resources which I can access through their website.
- The core curriculum within my accredited psychology degree is directed by the BPS and this will give me knowledge and appreciation of a range of psychological approaches to help understand human mind and behaviour.
- I will be able to choose some content on my degree and need to carefully consider how this best suits me and my personal goals to think about benefits to me in the future.
- Each academic year, I will build on my knowledge and skills, and research and professional ethics will be embedded throughout my degree.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

This chapter has introduced you to the discipline of psychology and has given you a flavour of just how fascinating and diverse the subject is. The different approaches to studying psychology boast both similarities and differences to each other and the most helpful way to consider them is not being in competition but all adding to pieces of the puzzle in the quest to learn more about behaviour. Through understanding more about the curriculum which you will cover and the requirements of each year of study you should feel confident that you can achieve your goals and, with hard work and determination, succeed in your studies.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

BPS (2017) *Practice Guidelines*. Available at: www.bps.org.uk/sites/www.bps.org.uk/files/Policy/Policy%20-%20Files/BPS%20Practice%20Guidelines%20%28Third%20Edition%29.pdf

BPS (2018) *Code of Ethics and Conduct*. Available at: www.bps.org.uk/sites/bps.org.uk/files/Policy%20-%20Files/BPS%20Code%20of%20Ethics%20and%20Conduct%20%28Updated%20July%202018%29.pdf

BPS (2021) *BPS Code of Human Research Ethics*. Available at: www.bps.org.uk/sites/www.bps.org.uk/files/Policy/Policy%20-%20Files/BPS%20Code%20of%20Human%20Research%20Ethics.pdf

BPS (2021) *Standards and Guidelines*. Available at: www.bps.org.uk/our-members/standards-and-guidelines

HCPC (2021) *Student Guidance on Conduct and Ethics*. Available at: www.hcpc-uk.org/education/learningresource

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BPS (2021). Available at: www.bps.org.uk/

