



Psychology

The science of behaviour and the brain

"Psychology taught me how to study things, rather than what to study. I learned that if you approach the study of complex things in a scientific way you can see the order in something that appears chaotic."

Rebecca Sargisson PhD Otago

Psychology is the science of behaviour and the brain, exploring the complex way humans and other animals interact with the world and each other.

Psychology examines the behavioural, perceptual, mental and emotional processes taking place in our brains. Psychologists also address applied topics as diverse as aircraft safety, eye-witness testimony, industrial relations, intellectual disabilities, hyperactivity in children, and other clinical issues.

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Why study Psychology?

- Learn about human behaviour
- Start a challenging career
- Develop research skills in the social and behavioural sciences
- Improve career flexibility with Psychology in your degree

You will learn

- how the brain stores memories and processes information
- why drugs, head injuries and hormones influence behaviour
- how parents' behaviour influences their children's development
- how our abilities change from childhood to old age
- how emotions affect our reasoning
- how prejudice and stereotypes arise
- what underlies disorders such as schizophrenia and dementia

Background required

Any University of Otago student can take first year papers in Psychology. Secondary school English, Biology and Statistics are useful but not essential.

Careers opportunities

In addition to specialising in Psychology, a degree in Psychology is useful for a wide range of other disciplines as well. Students take Psychology as part of degrees in Law, Marketing, Neuroscience, English, Physical Education, Management, Applied Science, Philosophy, Education, or Health Sciences.

There are many careers in Psychology in New Zealand and overseas, including positions as scientists in universities, government agencies,

organisations, and industry. Otago graduates are studying pilot error in aviation, learning deficits in children, the causes of rugby injuries, the biological basis of memory, and the effectiveness of alcohol and drug rehabilitation.

Otago also offers training in Clinical Psychology for those wanting to work in health-related services. Clinical Psychologists work in hospitals, private practice, and in the Department of Corrections. Many of our Clinical Psychology graduates work for a time overseas – particularly in the UK or Australia.

What does first-year Psychology involve?

There are two first-year papers, PSYC 111 (First Semester) and PSYC 112 (Second Semester). These papers have lecture and laboratory components and cover a wide range of topics such as:

Biopsychology – How do sleep, hormone levels, and drugs affect our behaviour?

Development – Why do our abilities and behaviours change with age?

Perception – What do our senses tell our brains?

Social psychology – How do people affect one another?

Abnormal psychology – When do we decide that behaviour is 'abnormal', and what causes such problems?

Neuropsychology – How do our brains work?

Learning – How do our experiences influence our behaviour?

Cognition – How do we remember things, solve problems, and use language?

Applied psychology – Can we improve pilot selection or enhance workplace safety?

If I major in Psychology what other subjects might I consider?

That depends on your interests and strengths. Here are a few examples, but there are many other possibilities.

- Student A takes Biology and Chemistry because she enjoys science.
- Student B takes Management and Marketing because he plans to work in industry or an organisation.
- Student C takes Mathematics and Computer Science because he is fascinated by artificial intelligence.
- Student D is interested in issues of social change. She adds Politics and Philosophy to her degree.

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PROFILES

Rose Patterson

Rose Patterson completed a Master of Psychology degree after being advised that postgraduate study would help towards a career in research and evaluation. This led to work in public health where she ran national surveys, qualitative research projects, and even advertising focus groups.

"I found the Postgraduate Master of Psychology programme at Otago really honed my research skills, giving me a set of tools for thinking and approaching research problems. It gave me a really solid grounding to branch into any area of research, providing me with a set of life skills, which are just as important."

"Interpreting the way people think and behave through the lens of psychology is immensely valuable for navigating the workplace, and life in general!"

Rose is now a Research Fellow for the Initiative, a public policy think tank. "The communication skills I developed at Otago have been invaluable. The lecturers in the Department of Psychology put a huge emphasis on writing clearly and succinctly for a general audience." She notes that being able to translate complex research into easy-to-understand material for decision makers is critically important to ensure research makes a difference in the real world.



Dr Niki Osborne

Growing up, Niki Osborne wanted to be a detective. She was fascinated by the processes that police investigators use to link crime scene evidence to perpetrators. At University, however, she became hooked on Psychology. Now, in her job with the Institute of Environmental Science and Research (ESR), Niki conducts her own kind of 'detective work' – uncovering the psychological processes influencing the interpretation of crime scene evidence.

"A forensic psychology course taught us how many of the contributors to wrongful conviction are areas in which psychology research can make a huge difference. I wanted to be a part of that."

Niki's PhD research looked at how forensic decision-makers can be swayed by more than just the evidence in front of them. "We are really vulnerable to preconceptions, emotions, and stereotypes that can bias our judgments. Psychological scientists can identify and resolve these types of problems."

After graduating with her PhD in Psychology, Niki began working at ESR, where she sees how her research findings translate to crime scene investigations. "If you had asked me five years ago where I would be now, I never would have thought I would have my dream job."

