

An Introduction to  
Psychology for the  
Middle East  
(and Beyond)



# An Introduction to Psychology for the Middle East (and Beyond)

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## INTRODUCTION AND WELCOME

Welcome! If you are like most students, this Introduction to Psychology class is your first exposure to what is a relatively new field in the region. As your editors and professors of psychology ourselves, we wanted to take a moment to tell you (and your professor) why we undertook this textbook project you are holding in your hands right now. We've both taught this class dozens of times in the UAE, but noticed that many students struggled with the material, terms used, and the level of English. In fact, we were frequently caught off-guard in classes using examples we might have used in the West only to realize they made no sense here! We felt frustrated, just like you, that many of the textbooks used in the region gave a lot of culturally or religiously inappropriate examples, or talked about things that were just not relevant to most students because they were things that didn't exist in this part of the world. Even we could see that the match was terrible. So, we spent a lot of time looking for more appropriate textbooks for you to use and the best that was available are what are called international versions of those same Western textbooks. The only difference is that those have more non-White people and a few things on cultures around the world like China, or Brazil. Better, but not great and most certainly still not "here".

We felt very strongly that psychology is meant to be a way for everyone - you included - to learn about yourself and you can't do that if the book is not about you. So, we decided, well, why not write one ourselves? However, we soon realized this was an insane amount of work and we also like our weekends! So, we asked people in psychology to help by writing different parts. We thought this was a good idea, for one, it was easier for us! Two, your professors like to write things and see their names in books (publications are the same as "likes" in our world!). And three, we wanted this book to be about the region and for the region, so that meant it had to be written by people in it or who at least had an attachment to it and understood how things worked here. You'll see that that is the case from our contributors list.

Finally, we know that not all of you reading this book are from here. There are a lot of international students in the GCC region who come from places like Kazakhstan, India, or China who might think, what is Islamic psychology all about? As you are here, we want you to learn about the region as well in the same way we'd learn about you if we were in your

country. We hope you'll enjoy it and maybe understand why things are the way they are instead of just wondering about it all the time.

That's pretty much it. Make sure to read the chapters and at the end of each one, there are several questions for you to work on and/or think about. Test yourself by answering them on your own and then go back in the text to see whether you got it right.

Finally, find us on LinkedIn and if you spot a mistake, tell us. Better yet, if you have an idea for something that should be included in a future updated version of this book, let us know. We'd be pleased to hear it. Tell your professor too.

Good luck this semester. Oh, and despite what your professor says, the point of this course is not to get an "A", it's to learn about you. And you're awesome!

Sincerely,  
Dr. Louise & Dr. Nina

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO PSYCHOLOGY

DR. LOUISE LAMBERT



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**Chapter Outline**

- What is Organizational Psychology? by Safiya Salim
- What is Educational Psychology? by Dr. Ruba Tabari
- What is Clinical Psychology? by Dr. Jacqueline Widmer
- What is Health Psychology? by Dr. Melanie Schlatter
- What is Neuropsychology? by Dr. Efthymios Papatzikis

- Approaches to the Science of Psychology by Dr. Carrie York Al-Karam
- Studying Psychology!
- Meet Mona Al-Ghamdi, Saudi Arabia
- Meet Meera Al Budoor, United Arab Emirates
- Psychology is a Science by Dr. Louise Lambert
- Research Ethics by Dr. Katharina A. Azim
- Over to you now...

Psychology is the study of behaviour and mental processes. This includes what people (and sometimes animals) do and how they think, respond, and react to events, other people, external stimuli (like cold temperatures and noise) and to themselves (their motivations and emotions). However, psychology has often been misunderstood: People sometimes think it is a form of mental control, or that psychologists have the ability to read minds! As we progress in this chapter, you will discover that psychology is not any of these things, but that it is, in fact, a science, just like any other field. Psychology is not limited to counselling people who suffer from distress in some way. It's also used to diagnose, organize, and improve all sorts of human processes and dynamics in a number of professional fields. Read onwards to see where psychology is most commonly found and what types of careers are available in the many branches of psychology. Maybe you'll find one you like!

## What is Organizational Psychology? by Safiya Salim



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I'm Safiya Salim and I am a business psychologist here in Dubai (UAE). Business Psychology, also known as Industrial and Organisational Psychology or Work Psychology, is a field that involves understanding human behaviour and interaction in a workplace. Although Business Psychology is a well known field in the West, it is quite new and gradually gaining popularity in the Middle East. Students from psychology or business backgrounds can specialise in an area of interest such as leadership, organisational change, diversity management, coaching, and ergonomics. Students who complete the programme may qualify to work in Corporate Psychology or related areas such as Recruitment, Human Resources, Health and Safety, Training, Learning and Development or as an Executive Coach or a Psychometric Assessor. I intend to work in academia as I find it rewarding; I enjoy research, teaching and interacting with young adults and trying to get them engaged and interested in the area of psychology and management!

## What is Educational Psychology? by Dr. Ruba Tabari



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I am Dr. Ruba Tabari, an educational psychologist (EP) living in Dubai. I have been working as an EP for 20 years. My work is diverse. I work with children, parents, schools, other professionals and authorities such as the Ministry of Education to ensure that children aged 2 to 19 years old achieve their potential. The work involves five areas: consultation, assessment, intervention, training and research.

Consultation is about giving those concerned the chance to talk. The EP's role is to facilitate the discussion and to use their training in psychological theory and practice to generate strategies that lead to solutions. Assessment involves using many tools and approaches to gather information about students from a number of sources, in a variety of settings and over time in order to inform an intervention plan. These plans are strategies designed to help students with learning and include collaboration with parents, schools and other professionals. Training is provided for staff, parents, children and young people, and other professionals and can be done with the whole school, in small group sessions, and through presentations and workshops. Finally, research is also part of an EP's job and informs evidence-based psychological practice at the individual, school and ministry level. Research helps EPs get better at their job, increase their knowledge and improve their practice.

## What is Clinical Psychology? by Dr. Jacqueline Widmer



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Ask most people what a psychologist does and they'll probably say that they treat "crazy" people! Clinical psychology is the branch of psychology that people associate most with the field of psychology as a whole. This was not always the case. When psychology emerged as an independent field in the Western world, psychologists were mostly concerned with the experimental study of thoughts, perceptions, and cognitive processes. The treatment of mental illness was mostly conducted by neurologists and psychiatrists. Clinical psychologists first became known for developing psychological tests that helped to assess people's cognitive and psychological functioning. In the West, this changed when World War II broke out and there were more psychological wounds to be treated than there were psychiatrists and neurologists available. Clinical psychologists were called to task and thus became recognized as providers of psychotherapy. Today, clinical psychology is recognized as the branch of psychology that studies mental illness in order to prevent, diagnose, and treat it. It is the most popular career choice for psychology students as it is associated with the study and treatment of mental illness.

## What is Health Psychology? by Dr. Melanie Schlatter



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I'm Dr. Melanie and I'm a health psychologist, which is the study of biological, psychological, and social contributors to health, illness, and health care behaviour. The field is divided into areas such as behavioural factors that influence health (i.e., smoking or exercise) and their antecedents (like stress, personality, lack of support); illness behaviours (e.g., delaying seeking help for symptoms); health-care behaviours (such as proactive screening); and treatment behaviours (i.e., medication adherence). Health psychologists are found in academia, hospitals, or private practice. We are interested in why some people are healthy; why others get sick, and how people manage when faced with illness and treatment. Our aim is to teach people how to become proactive about health. Think of a group of diabetic people. You'd think they'd all be prescribed the same treatment and their conditions would be controlled. Yet, to ignore individual differences is a mistake. These people may have different ideas about diabetes (e.g., embarrassing disease versus an illness), its causal factors (e.g., evil eye versus poor lifestyle), how it affects them (e.g., denial or willingness to take responsibility), how to help themselves (e.g., helplessness or feeling in control), and how others can help them (e.g., mistrust of doctors or willingness to learn), which could affect their treatment. Thus, planning client interventions relates to symptom management, psychological adjustment, changing unhelpful illness beliefs, and improving health behaviours.

## What is Neuropsychology? by Dr. Efthymios Papatzikis



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I'm Dr. Tim! My studies focus on neuroscience, a field that involves the structure, function and development of the brain and central nervous system using neuroimaging techniques such as electroencephalography (EEG), or functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI). When neuroscience tries to understand how conscious and unconscious processes of the brain impact behaviour and cognitive functions, a specialized domain is formed, called neuropsychology or cognitive neuroscience. Changes in the environment, illness, and injuries can affect the way a person feels, thinks, and behaves; thus, a neuropsychologist will study and explain situations like memory difficulties, mood disturbances, learning difficulties and nervous system dysfunctions. Although neuropsychology and cognitive neuroscience are connected, they differ. Cognitive neuroscience focuses on the development of research and knowledge, while neuropsychology is practical and used in clinical settings. Cognitive neuroscientists are the research scientists and neuropsychologists are the people who make you feel better after an unfortunate situation involving your head!

Regardless of the field in which you practise psychology, i.e., health, organizational, or clinical, there are many approaches and these refer to

the framework that is used with which to understand what is being studied and in what way the problem, opportunity, or challenge will be addressed.

## **Approaches to the Science of Psychology** **by Dr. Carrie York Al-Karam**

Suppose you want to understand why one individual is social, outgoing, and likes to spend time with friends whereas another person is quiet and prefers to be alone. How would you try to understand this difference? Is it their personality? Is their behaviour learned from family or culture? Is it controlled by genes and hormones? Psychologists take various approaches to understanding and answering these questions. Depending on the approach, the assumptions, questions, and methods they use to investigate the question will vary, informing the types of interventions or treatments they use. The following are some of the most common approaches psychologists use today.

### **Cognitive**

A cognitive psychologist would be interested in how the brain takes in information, creates perception, forms and retrieves memories, processes information, and generates patterns of action; in other words, how our mind deals with incoming information and how we behave in response to it. Cognitive psychologists are interested in mental or “cognitive” abilities such as sensation and perception, learning, memory, thinking, consciousness, intelligence, and creativity. This is different than a biological psychologist who is interested in understanding how the brain as a physical organ affects and is affected by behaviour and mental processes. A cognitive psychologist is interested in the cognitive processes of the brain but a biological psychologist is interested in the workings of the organ itself.

### **Behavioural**

Psychologists who take this approach believe that human behaviour is determined by what a person has learned. Built upon the work of John Watson and B. F. Skinner, behavioural psychologists focus on observable behaviour and try to understand how past experiences with rewards and punishments shape a person’s actions. In other words, behaviourists try to understand a person’s learning history. When an individual shows maladaptive habits or problematic behaviour, certain techniques, which are

based on the principles of learning, are used in order to modify that behaviour.

### **Social**

Social psychologists understand how individuals influence one another as well as how people think and behave in groups. It is the study of how and why people think, feel, and do the things they do in the presence of others, real or imagined. In studying how people act in certain situations, we can better understand how stereotypes are formed, why racism and sexism exist, and why people do things in front of others that they wouldn't ordinarily do elsewhere. Social psychologists study things like group behaviour, leadership, conformity and individuation, prejudice, altruism, attraction, and attitudes.

### **Positive**

Positive psychology is a new approach, having developed mainly since the late 1990s. Whereas psychologists have been interested in mental disorders and trying to "fix" what's wrong with people, positive psychologists are interested in understanding what's working well. The idea is this: the removal of psychopathology does not necessarily mean an individual will thrive and be happy. Rather, strengths and positive characteristics need to be nurtured. Therefore, interventions that positive psychologists use are designed to help individuals develop the strengths and positive qualities that they possess. This is different than focusing on what's wrong with someone and trying to fix or remove it.

### **Islamic**

An Islamic approach to psychology is holistic, taking into account the spiritual aspect of the human being—the soul. The focus on behaviour and mental processes that modern day psychologists take is not considered wrong; but, incomplete. From an Islamic view, the most important unit of the individual through which all other cognitive functions operate is the soul. Understanding the nature of the soul, therefore, is vital. Hence, the work of an Islamic psychologist would be to understand the nature of the human soul as well as treatments that are designed to ameliorate spiritual distress. As such, when an individual has a mental illness, a psychologist with an Islamic orientation would consider spiritual reasons for the distress, in addition to biological, psychological or environmental factors.

Because there are so many approaches in psychology, it is important to consider which model is best suited to you! Not all approaches will suit your interests or personality. In therapeutic work, the fit between the psychologist and the client is also an important factor that contributes to treatment success. So, if you need the services of a psychologist, shop around until you find one that's right for you.

## **Studying Psychology!**

Are you interested in pursuing a degree in psychology? Like many fields, psychology is a professional field, which means you will spend many years in university, choose an area of specialization, conduct research of your own and perform the duties of your specialization with real individuals over a period of several months or years to obtain a licence to practise. This knowledge is based in science; thus, you need to be able to read scientific articles and understand what good research is so that you can use the right tools, techniques and latest discoveries in the field. This is what distinguishes psychology from self-help. Further, you need to keep up with developments over time by attending conferences, reading research and other books, getting additional training, and learning about other fields, like medicine, law, and psychiatry to understand what your clients (sometimes also called patients) are experiencing and how new developments impact your work. It's a lot of work, but there are guidelines and professional associations to help you. Psychology is a satisfying career that gives you the chance to learn a lot about people, events, psychological conditions, culture, religion, and societies – even yourself! Read on to see what these students studied and understand more about what psychology means to them.

### **Meet Mona Al-Ghamdi, Saudi Arabia**

“Psychology never crossed my mind as a degree. You could say it was fate that brought me here and once I got here, I knew it was meant to be all along. I was born and raised in the UK where I was hoping to pursue Languages at university; but, I ended up moving to Saudi Arabia and had to base my choice on limited degree options taught in English. I saw psychology and instantly knew this was what I wanted.

What interested me in the topic is that it is so relatable and adaptable in everyday life. It was a degree that could be useful to me no matter what results I got, no matter what job I did. It was more than just a university course, it was an opportunity to find answers for questions I always had.

Being born the youngest and only girl with five older brothers and going through a cross-cultural identity crisis made me realize that psychology was my key to understanding myself and my place in the world.

After graduating in 2009, I worked in a non-related field for a few years before going back to pursue further education. This led me to obtaining a Master's (MA) degree in Counselling from the University of Nottingham in 2014. Psychology is of course, a large umbrella under which are many disciplines and schools of thought. I chose Counseling, because I was drawn to it in an almost spiritual way and felt it was my calling. My need to help and counsel people has existed since primary school days. Without knowing it, I was working my way into counseling throughout my life based on my nature.

The MA degree was the most eye-opening experience because I went to a therapist myself and felt what it was like to be in the client's seat or maybe because the course allowed for a lot self-reflection. I also studied Rogerian philosophies and although I have not officially practised yet, I believe the Person-Centered Approach is my chosen modality since I connected well with its theories and experienced it first-hand. My thesis was focused on the GCC region as throughout my lectures I continuously tried to apply everything I learnt in my courses back to my home and culture to see how and if they fit.

Without my Master's degree, I would not have known the person I wanted to be. That person will be an accredited and certified therapist running her own private practice in the GCC one day. I believe much needs to be addressed in the region, so this is my goal. Until then, I will work and study and use all possible avenues to follow the path that will lead me to my dream."

### **Meet Meera Al Budoor, United Arab Emirates**

"When I first enrolled in Zayed University, I was asked to choose a major from the first semester. I was told that it's for the sake of getting an approximate number of freshman students interested in each college and that I could change it anytime, so I chose the first major that came to my mind: International Relations. This major was the most interesting to me based on the choices in the course catalog that I saw during orientation. At that time, I didn't even know that Psychology was offered as a major.

On the first day of my third semester (my first official day in the International Relations major), I was told that I needed an elective and was ecstatic when I saw that there were seats available in the Introduction to Psychology course. Leaving my first lesson, I learnt that Zayed University

would teach me something I'm passionate about. Since the university had opened up a Psychology major, I realized that I had found my calling. As soon as I left the class, I called my parents to let them know I would be changing my major. And that is what I did.

Common thoughts that pop into people's mind when they find out I'm a Psychology student are 'Can you read me?!', 'Can you analyze personalities from a first impression?', or my personal favourite, 'Don't psychologists go mad dealing with crazy people?!' I'm sure you know the answer to all the questions is 'No'. There are a lot of stereotypical thoughts regarding psychology major students and 99% aren't true.

Psychology and the Bachelor's degree in Psychology are very broad. You barely have enough classes to get a glimpse of the vast branches of Psychology as a field of study or work. Personally, I've always leaned more towards Clinical Psychology and therapy, but another interesting field was Social Psychology. Clinical Psychology entails a deeper understanding of mental disorders and ways to treat them while Social Psychology focuses more on the effects of society on an individual. Both are very different fields but equally interesting. Another personal favourite was Bio-Psychology and the study of the brain. I remember distinctly what my professor told me at the beginning of that class and after that I was hooked! She said, 'Is the brain capable of understanding something as complex as the brain itself?'

I want to do a Master's in Clinical Psychology and if I get the chance, maybe even a Ph.D. The wonderful thing about psychology is that not only do you benefit from it by developing a career, but as an Emirati woman, I think it has given me life skills that I use on a daily basis with my interactions, my responses and relationships with family and friends. It has given me a deeper understanding about human behaviour and development. I'm sure these skills will be put to the test when I become a mother."