Preface:

*What Psychology Is Not.*

**She plopped herself down next to me, hair perfectly sprayed in place, her fingers tipped in pink manicure.**  Without much preamble, she launched into a detailed rehashing of a certain relative’s misbehaviors.

We were at a conference, I was speaking and she was attending. When people find out I study psychology, it’s not unusual for them to launch into deeply personal stories. This doesn’t bother me, and listening often seems to help them. But I’ve come to dread the expectant question that ends many of these encounters:

“So why would she act like that?”

She took a bite of her sandwich, expecting me to pick up the pieces of the story and arrange them into an orderly, revealing picture of the relative’s inner psyche.

**I’m never sure how to say this without sounding rude but: *That’s not how psychology works.***

Psychology is not a genie lamp you can rub and have a fully-fleshed magical answer spout out in a poof of blue smoke.

Because there is never one single answer.

At any given moment, a whole stew of genetic, cognitive, situational, interpersonal, and cultural factors bears down on someone’s behavior, along with their personal beliefs and choices.

Swirling that stew and divining a sun-shining-down-from-the-sky answer - typically from a scrappy second-hand anecdote (usually itself delivered with some bias and emotion) - is not usually possible.

**That doesn’t mean psychology isn’t deeply useful.**

We actually do know quite a bit about the genetic, cognitive, situational, interpersonal, and cultural factors that bear on behavior. We understand a lot about how people select beliefs and make choices.

There are all sorts of robust effects that make some aspects of human behavior wildly predictable. We’ll learn about many of them in this course.

The problem we encounter in explaining a single situation, like that of a misbehaving relative, is that the study of psychology uses the tools of science.

**And science doesn’t ask general questions like “why would she act like that?”**

You have to distill a single idea out of what you want to know, and then break that idea down into much smaller questions. Then study those, piece by piece.

And you can’t even begin with “Was she envious?”

You start even further back: *What is envy? Does it differ from jealousy?* \*

Once you’ve hammered out a working definition of envy (which some people may never agree on), you can go on to do an experiment that explores one small piece of envy.

**For example,** you might ask the question - what kind of person would we most envy?

You could bring people into a lab, ask them some questions about themselves. Then you’d have them read profiles of others and their accomplishments, and rate how much they envied that person. Then you sift through the data and look for patterns. (Turns out, we tend to envy people we perceive to be most like ourselves.)

Or say you might want to know how envy would affect someone’s cooperation.

You could set up a game where three people ‘earn’ a certain amount of money, and the fourth person ‘earns’ fewer coins. And then you could see if the person who earned fewer coins becomes less likely to cooperate during the game. You might find, for example, that the person is more likely to punish the people who got more, or that they’re more likely to quit and leave.

And then you’d have the tricky task of deciding whether this was truly because of envy, or because the situation offended their sense of fairness...or both.

**The point is, the study of envy will be incremental, and sometimes messy.**

**But despite this, you may find a lot of fruitful things along the way.**

Psychology findings are most useful when you use them like a CEO (e.g. using the information to set business policies that will promote or prevent certain behaviors), rather than trying to use it as a detective (e.g. trying to use psychology to explain a single complex situation).

In other words, you may not be able to read the research on envy and come up with the exact reason your cousin Jackie spilled raspberry lemonade all over your best tablecloth, then stormed out of the family picnic.

Yes, you could speculate that she was envious of your new house, so she decided to leave and slosh her drink on the way out - but it could be equally true that she just got an upsetting text and needed to rush out. Psychology research simply cannot provide you with enough information to make that situation-specific distinction.

**But you CAN use psychology to create policies that will set you up for success.**

For example, research on envy might make you stop setting different prices for different clients, no matter how sorry you felt for that one person. Because you’d realize that if your clients find out about these discrepancies, the ensuing envy and/or sense of unfairness might result in people lashing out or leaving.

As we go through this course, you’re going to learn about a lot of effects that are wildly good at predicting behavior, and you may find many ways to use them to your and your clients’ advantage.

But while you’re absorbing this information, I’d encourage you to resist the temptation to be smug and knowingly muse “ahh, so *that’s* why she’s been such a jerk to me. She’s just envious.” For one thing, you might be committing one of the largest mistakes humans make (attributing behavior to someone’s character rather than situations - something we’ll talk a lot about in a coming lesson).

But for another, you might just not have enough information to explain a single incident. These studies were conducted using dozens or hundreds of subjects to look for patterns across people, not to be the be-all end-all explanation for single data points.

In short, use the information to be proactive, not reactive.

**Which brings us to one final note: When we’re learning about psychology in this course, we are going to go back and talk about some original studies.**

**This is not an arbitrary decision.**

It’s not because we want to be all stuffy and academic in reading original sources.

It’s because when you go look at the research, you can see exactly what questions were asked and answered. This prevents common, foolish errors.

Not long ago, the internet exploded with headlines like “STUDY SHOWS FACEBOOK MAKES US MISERABLE.” They said a new study showed that people who had logged into Facebook in the last couple of hours had a decline in well-being.

And everyone who loves to hate on Facebook shared these articles rapid-fire, because here is *scientific proof* that Facebook is terrible for us.

Except, when you go back and read [the original study](http://www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi/10.1371/journal.pone.0069841), you find that it’s actually passive scrolling through Facebook that makes people feel worse.

When people engaged with friends directly through Facebook (chatting, liking, commenting) rather than just scrolling and taking things in, there was no such unhappy trend.

This makes sense, of course. If all you do is glaze over and scroll and watch how much fun everyone else is having, it’d be no surprise if feelings of boredom, envy, and frustration start to roil inside. But if you’re using Facebook to actively connect with others, you’re not going to sit and marinate in bad feelings. In fact, other research has shown that active Facebook use can [increase social trust, life satisfaction](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2009.01474.x/abstract), [and bonding, while also decreasing loneliness](http://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?id=1753613).

So this study everyone reported on doesn’t show us that Facebook makes us miserable, it shows us that we need to log into Facebook with purpose, rather than with passivity.

**The bigger lesson: If all you do is read what someone else says about psychology instead of going to look at the study, you can be easily misled by others’ biases and agendas.** You won’t know what questions were asked or how they were answered, and you won’t have a sense of the scope or limitations of what the researchers found.

And (geek warning): You’ll also miss some seriously weird, quirky things worth laughing and thinking about.

In this course, we’re going to read about everything from scary bridges influencing dating, to people zapping each other with electricity (well, or so they thought), to fake prisons to how hot coffee influences hiring decisions. And what all these things can teach us about the human mind.

But don’t worry - we’ll also talk about how to use what we find. We’ll just geek out a bit along the way. Deal?

With all this in mind, let’s launch into Week One, where we’ll learn all about what I consider to be the most useful human emotion of all:

Fear.

[Footnote below, please put on same page as the asterisk….]

*\* If you’re interested, envy and jealousy are different, and people often confuse the two. Envy is coveting something someone else has. Jealousy is when something we have (like a relationship) is threatened by another person.*

*To keep them straight: You may experience* ***envy*** *when you see someone driving a cool car, but you’d be* ***jealous*** *if that person tried to pick up your beloved in that cool car. Envy is wanting something you don’t have, jealousy is concern that you’re going to lose something you currently have.*