

Social Psychology and Personality

AP Psychology

Explaining Behaviour: Attribution

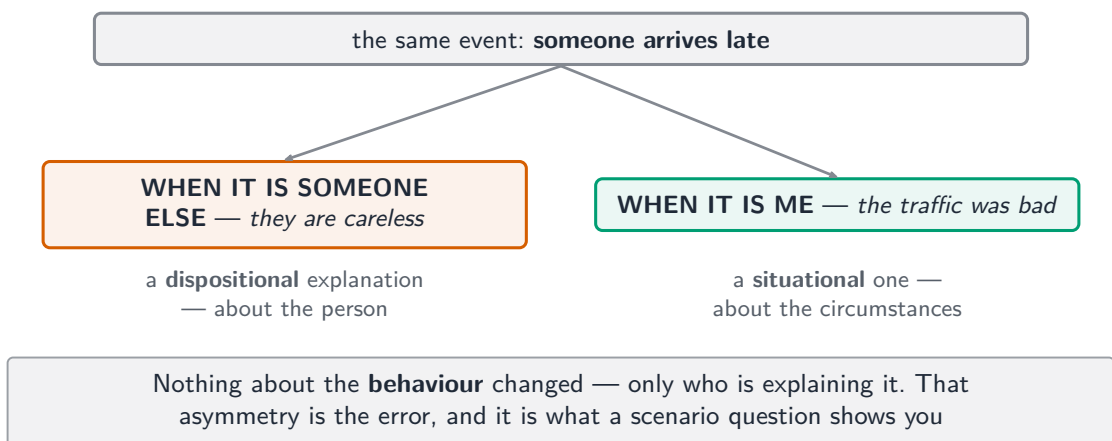
Social psychology studies how people think about, influence, and relate to others. It begins with **attribution** - how we explain behaviour.

An explanation is either **dispositional** (about the person's personality) or **situational** (about the circumstances). People are not even-handed about which they choose:

- The **fundamental attribution error** is over-using dispositional explanations for *other* people's behaviour.
- The **actor-observer bias** - is explaining your own behaviour situationally while explaining others' dispositionally.
- The **self-serving bias** credits success to yourself and blames failure on the situation.
- The **just-world phenomenon** is the belief that people get what they deserve.

A person's **explanatory style** can be **optimistic** or **pessimistic**, and this shapes how they respond to setbacks.

Person perception has its own effects. The **mere exposure effect** means repeated contact increases liking. A **self-fulfilling prophecy** occurs when expectations cause the behaviour that confirms them. **Social comparison** is judging yourself against others, either **upward** or **downward**.



Attitudes and Attitude Change

A **stereotype** is a generalised idea about a group; it reduces mental effort but can be inaccurate and harmful. **Prejudice** is an attitude, and **discrimination** is the behaviour. **Implicit attitudes** are held without full awareness.

Attitudes resist change. **Belief perseverance** keeps a belief alive even after the evidence for it is discredited. **Confirmation bias** is seeking evidence that fits what you already believe.

Cognitive dissonance is the discomfort felt when actions and attitudes conflict. Because the action has already happened, people often resolve it by changing the *attitude* - which is why doing something can change what a person believes.

Social Situations

Social norms define the behaviour a group expects. Behaviour changes when others are present:

- **Conformity** is adjusting behaviour to match a group. It rises with group size (up to a point), unanimity, and ambiguity, and falls when even one other person dissents.
- **Obedience** is following an instruction from an authority. It rises with the authority's perceived legitimacy and closeness, and falls when the victim is close or the authority is distant.
- **Normative social influence** is conforming to be accepted;
informational social influence is conforming because you think others know better.

Persuasion has two routes in the **elaboration likelihood model**: the **central route** uses the strength of the argument, and the **peripheral route** uses cues such as attractiveness. Sequential techniques matter too: the **foot-in-the-door** technique starts with a small request, while the **door-in-the-face** technique starts with an unreasonable one.

Group settings change behaviour further. **Social facilitation** improves performance on simple or well-practised tasks when others watch, but harms performance on difficult ones. **Social loafing** is reduced individual effort in a group.

Deindividuation is loss of self-awareness in a crowd. **Group polarization** pushes a group's average view further in its original direction, and **groupthink** is the suppression of dissent to keep harmony.

Individualism and **collectivism** shape all of these, and **multiculturalism** describes societies holding several traditions together.

The **false consensus effect** is overestimating how many people agree with you. **Superordinate goals** - shared aims that need cooperation - reduce hostility between groups.

Altruism is selfless helping, though **prosocial behavior** may also bring benefit to the helper. The **bystander effect** shows people are less likely to help as the number of onlookers rises, because of **diffusion of responsibility**.

Worked example: evidence and a course concept. In the 2025 Evidence-Based Question, Source 1 studied 45 male undergraduates. Researchers compared an attentive audience with working alone. Participants completed their own-shoe tasks faster with an audience, but took longer on unfamiliar clothing tasks with an audience. An original worked response is: “An audience can improve well-learned performance but impair difficult, unfamiliar performance. Participants completed their own-shoe tasks faster with an attentive audience, but took longer on unfamiliar clothing tasks than when alone (Source 1). Social facilitation explains the opposite changes by task difficulty and familiarity, supporting a conditional claim rather than a rule that others always help.” The official B(ii) criterion distinguishes explaining the evidence from applying a course concept to explain how it supports the claim. This practises Part A and B; a full EBQ also needs evidence from a different source and a different concept in Part C.

Group-pressure comparison. Mei privately believes B but says A because all her classmates say A and she wants to fit in. Matching the group is conformity; her stated wish for acceptance supports normative influence. If she were unsure and believed the others knew better, informational influence would fit. Arun follows a teacher’s instruction to hand in his paper: this is obedience to authority. If one classmate now says B, the loss of unanimity can reduce pressure on Mei, but does not guarantee her choice. Use the motive and source of pressure; the same visible action may have more than one explanation.

CONFORMITY — matching a group

rises with group size, up to a point
rises when the group is unanimous
falls sharply with one ally who dissents
rises when the answer is ambiguous

OBEDIENCE — following an authority

rises with the authority’s legitimacy
rises with distance from the consequence
falls when someone else refuses first
falls when responsibility is made personal

A dissenter can reduce group pressure. The effect depends on the setting; these conditions do not guarantee a particular response

Personality: Psychodynamic and Humanistic

	Psychodynamic	Humanistic	Social-cognitive	Trait
what drives it	unconscious conflict	drive to grow	person, behaviour, environment interact	enduring traits
key ideas	defense mechanisms: repression, projection	unconditional positive regard, self-actualization	reciprocal determinism, self-efficacy, locus of control	the Big Five: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, neuroticism
how assessed	projective tests (weak reliability)	interviews, self-report	observation in context	self-report inventories

all four describe the SAME person from different angles

Four approaches to personality, each with a different driver and a different way of measuring it

Personality is a person’s characteristic pattern of thinking, feeling, and behaving. Four approaches are examinable.

The **psychodynamic** approach holds that **unconscious** processes drive personality. **Ego defense mechanisms** protect the person from anxiety, and the examinable set is **denial**, **displacement**, **projection**, **rationalization**, **reaction formation**, **regression**, **repression**, and **sublimation**. It assesses personality with **projective tests**, which present an ambiguous stimulus; these have weak **reliability** and **validity**.

The **humanistic** approach focuses on growth. It emphasises **unconditional positive regard** and **self-actualization** - becoming the fullest version of oneself.

Personality: Social-Cognitive and Trait

The **social-cognitive** approach explains personality through **reciprocal determinism**: the person, their behaviour, and the environment each influence the other two. **Self-efficacy** - belief in one’s own ability to succeed at a task - is central, as is **locus of control**, which is **internal** or **external**.

Trait theories describe personality as enduring characteristics. The **Big Five** traits are **openness to experience**, **conscientiousness**

, **extraversion**, **agreeableness**, and **neuroticism**. Traits are measured with self-report inventories, which are more reliable than projective tests.

Motivation

Several theories explain what drives behaviour:

- **Drive-reduction theory** says behaviour reduces a physical need to restore **homeostasis**.
- **Arousal theory** says people seek an optimal level of arousal; the **Yerkes-Dodson law** links performance to arousal. The optimal level depends on the task: difficult or unfamiliar tasks generally require lower arousal than easy, well-learned tasks. Increasing arousal does not always improve performance.
- **Self-determination theory** separates **intrinsic motivation** (from within) from **extrinsic motivation** (from reward), and **incentive theory** focuses on the pull of rewards.
- **Instincts** are innate fixed patterns, in many non-human animals. The course says humans do not seem to show these patterns; this does not deny innate capacities or reflexes. An unlearned choice alone does not establish a fixed, stimulus-triggered instinct.
- **Lewin's motivational conflicts** names three: **approach-approach**, **approach-avoidance**, and **avoidance-avoidance**.
- **Sensation-seeking theory** explains differences in the need for novelty.

Worked motivation comparison. Jia drinks after a long run because she is thirsty: drive reduction explains reducing a physical need and restoring homeostasis. She chooses a new puzzle because her usual game feels dull: arousal theory explains seeking suitable stimulation. A promised reward for a school task illustrates incentives and extrinsic motivation. Enjoying the puzzle itself illustrates intrinsic motivation. The same activity can have both motives; identify the stated reason rather than assuming one theory explains every action.

Worked conflicts. Choosing between two enjoyable events at the same time is approach-approach. Choosing between an unpleasant chore now and missing an outing later is avoidance-avoidance. One performance that offers an exciting opportunity but also possible embarrassment is approach-avoidance: the same option has an attraction and a cost. Identify the options before classifying the conflict.

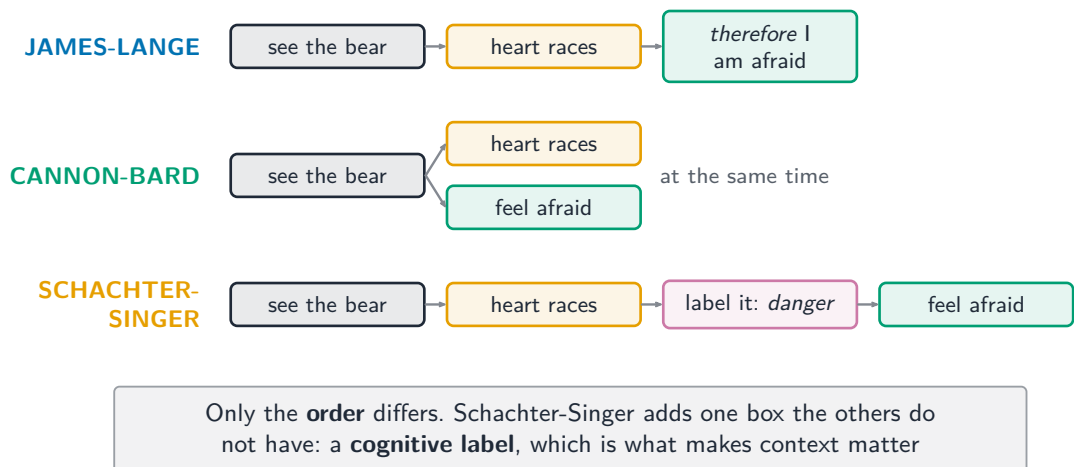
Eating shows physical and mental processes interacting. **Ghrelin** and **leptin**, regulated by the hypothalamus, control hunger and fullness, while external factors - the sight of food, the time of day, a shared meal - change how much people eat.

Emotion

Emotion, also called **affect**, combines physical arousal, expressive behaviour, and conscious experience. The exam requires comparison of physiological and cognitive experiences in succession or simultaneously, and accounts requiring a cognitive label. Specific historical theory names are outside the AP Psychology Exam scope. As optional historical context, the **James-Lange theory** - (the body responds first, and emotion is the reading of that response), the **Cannon-Bard theory** - (arousal and emotion occur at once), and the **Schachter-Singer two-factor theory** - (arousal plus a **cognitive label**). **Broaden-and-build theory** - proposes that positive emotions widen thinking and build lasting resources.

Worked emotion comparison. Sam notices a racing heart on entering a room. Interpreting the setting as dangerous accompanies fear; interpreting it as a celebration accompanies excitement. In a cognitive-label account, context supplies an interpretation of arousal. A successive account instead proposes bodily changes before experienced emotion, while a simultaneous account proposes arousal and conscious emotion together. These illustrative cases compare the proposed mechanisms; they are not experimental evidence proving one account.

Some facial expressions are recognised across cultures, but **display rules** - a culture's norms for showing emotion - and the events that trigger emotion both vary.



Exam tips

- **Fundamental attribution error** applies to explaining *others*. For your own behaviour, distinguish actor-observer explanations from self-serving explanations of success or failure.

- **Social facilitation** improves *simple* tasks and harms difficult ones. Say which kind of task the scenario describes.
- Separate **conformity** (matching a group) from **obedience** (following an authority).
- For **cognitive dissonance**, name the conflict and say which side changed - usually the attitude, because the behaviour already happened.
- Learn the **Big Five** as a set; questions often ask you to place a described person on one named trait.
- For emotion, compare succession, simultaneous responses and cognitive labelling. Specific historical theory names are outside the exam scope.

Vocabulary card meanings

Social psychology: The study of how other people influence thought, feeling, and action. dispositional: Explaining behaviour by the person's traits rather than by the situation. situational: Explaining behaviour by the circumstances rather than by the person's traits. actor-observer bias: Blaming one's own actions on the situation while blaming others' actions on their character. self-serving bias: Taking credit for successes and blaming failures on outside factors. explanatory style: A habitual way of explaining good and bad events. optimistic: Tending to expect favourable outcomes. pessimistic: Tending to expect unfavourable outcomes. upward: Comparing oneself with people who appear to be doing better. downward: Comparing oneself with people who appear to be doing worse. Belief perseverance: Clinging to a belief after the evidence for it has been discredited. Confirmation bias: Seeking and remembering evidence that fits what one already believes. Normative social influence: Conforming in order to be liked or to avoid standing out. informational social influence: Conforming because one takes others as a source of information. Persuasion: Trying to change another person's attitudes or behaviour. elaboration likelihood model: A theory of two routes by which a message can persuade. central route: Persuasion through careful thinking about the arguments. peripheral route: Persuasion through superficial cues, such as attractiveness or slogans. foot-in-the-door: Gaining agreement to a large request by first getting agreement to a small one. door-in-the-face: Gaining agreement to a moderate request by first making one that is refused as too large. Social loafing: Putting in less effort when one works in a group than when working alone. Deindividuation: Losing self-awareness and restraint in a group that provides anonymity. Group polarization: A group's views becoming more extreme after discussion. Superordinate goals: Shared aims that require opposing groups to cooperate. prosocial behavior: Action intended to benefit another person. diffusion of responsibility: Feeling less personal duty to act when many other people are present. psychodynamic: An approach that emphasises unconscious motives and early conflict. unconscious: Mental content that affects a person without that person being aware of it. rationalization: Inventing a respectable reason for a feeling or an act whose real motive is hidden. humanistic: An approach that emphasises growth, free will, and the whole person. self-actualization: The motive to fulfil one's potential. social-cognitive: An approach

that combines thinking, behaviour, and the social setting. Self-efficacy: Belief in one's ability to succeed at a specific task. locus of control: Whether a person sees outcomes as due to their own actions or to outside forces. neuroticism: A trait of tending toward anxiety, moodiness, and emotional instability. Yerkes-Dodson law: The finding that the most helpful level of alertness depends on how difficult the task is. intrinsic motivation: Doing something because it is interesting or satisfying in itself. extrinsic motivation: Doing something in order to gain a reward or avoid a punishment. incentive theory: The view that behaviour is pulled by external rewards. Instincts: Inborn, fixed patterns of behaviour. Lewin's motivational conflicts: Situations in which a person is pulled between two or more goals. approach-approach: A conflict between two attractive options. avoidance-avoidance: A conflict between two unattractive options. James-Lange theory: The view that a bodily reaction comes first and the feeling is the perception of that reaction. Cannon-Bard theory: The view that bodily arousal and the feeling occur together. Schachter-Singer two-factor theory: The view that emotion is arousal plus a cognitive label for that arousal. Broaden-and-build theory: The idea that positive emotions widen thinking and help build lasting resources. display rules: Cultural norms for when and how emotions may be shown.