

Social Psychology and Personality

AP Psychology ■ Unit 4

AP Psychology



What we will cover

- 1 Explaining Behaviour: Attribution
- 2 Attitudes and Attitude Change
- 3 Social Situations
- 4 Personality: Psychodynamic and Humanistic
- 5 Personality: Social-Cognitive and Trait
- 6 Motivation



Explaining Behaviour: Attribution

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

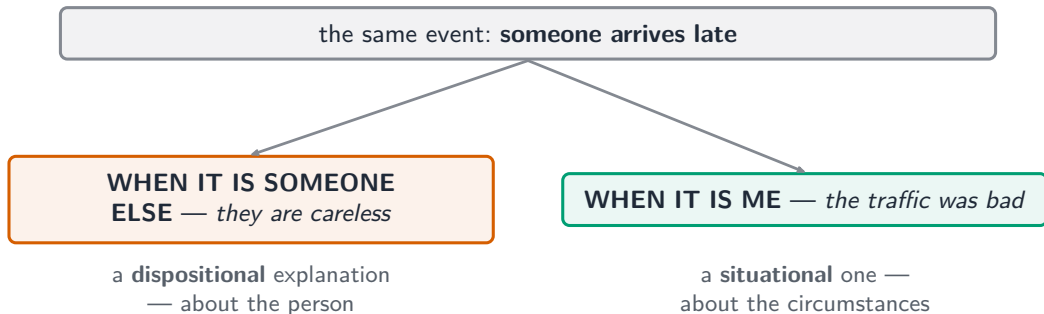
- The **fundamental attribution error** is over-using dispositional explanations for *other* people's behaviour.
- The **actor-observer bias** - is explaining your own behaviour situationally while explaining others' dispositionally.
- The **self-serving bias** credits success to yourself and blames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

Explaining Behaviour: Attribution, continued

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

Social comparison is judging yourself against others, either **upward** or **downward**.

The attribution asymmetry



Nothing about the **behaviour** changed – only who is explaining it. That asymmetry is the error, and it is what a scenario question shows you

How we perceive other people

mere exposure effect

repeated contact **increases liking**, with no other reason needed

self-fulfilling prophecy

an expectation changes behaviour until it **makes itself true**

belief perseverance

a belief survives even after the evidence for it is discredited

confirmation bias

we seek and notice evidence that **fits** what we already think

All four say the same thing from different angles: the perceiver is not a camera. What we expect shapes what we see and, through the prophecy, what actually happens.



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.

Confirmation bias is seeking evidence that fits what you already believe.

Two routes to persuasion

the model

the elaboration likelihood model

central route

uses the **strength of the argument** – works when the audience is motivated and able to think it through, and the change lasts

peripheral route

uses **cues around** the argument – an attractive presenter, a celebrity, a catchy tune – and the change fades

foot-in-the-door

a small request first makes a large one more likely to be granted

cognitive dissonance

acting against your attitude is uncomfortable, so the **attitude moves** to match the act

Which route an advert uses tells you what it thinks of its audience – and predicts whether the effect will still be there next week.



Social Situations

- **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.

Conformity and obedience

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

One dissenter is the strongest single factor on **both** sides – which is why the scenario nearly always varies that one detail.

Compliance, and how requests are engineered

Foot-in-the-door

A small request first makes the larger one likelier – consistency with the identity the first agreement created.

Door-in-the-face

Door-in-the-face: an unreasonable request refused, then the real one, which now looks like a concession worth reciprocating.

Norms do the work

Both exploit **social norms** – consistency and reciprocity – rather than any argument about the request itself.

Name the technique *and* the norm it exploits. The norm is the explanation; the technique is only the label.

Helping, and why a crowd stops it

altruism

selfless helping, at a cost to the helper

prosocial behavior

the broader category – helping that *may* also benefit the helper

bystander effect

the **more** people present, the **less** likely any one of them helps

diffusion of responsibility

the mechanism: each bystander assumes someone else will act

the counter

naming one person directly (“you, in the red coat”) removes the diffusion and help arrives

The bystander effect is about **number**, not indifference. That is the distinction the free-response question wants drawn.

What a group does to individual behaviour

social facilitation

an audience **improves** performance on simple or well-practised tasks – and **harms** it on difficult or new ones

social loafing

individual effort falls when it cannot be identified within a group's output

deindividuation

anonymity in a crowd loosens self-restraint

group polarisation

discussion pushes a group toward a **more extreme** version of its initial leaning

groupthink

the desire for agreement suppresses dissent and produces a worse decision

Individualism and **collectivism** modulate every one of these, and **multiculturalism** describes societies holding several such orientations at once.



Four accounts of where personality comes from

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** , ...

The theories of emotion, side by side

James-Lange theory

James-Lange theory: the bodily response comes first, and the emotion is our reading of it – we are afraid *because* we tremble.

Cannon-Bard theory

Cannon-Bard theory: body and emotion happen at once, both triggered by the thalamus.

Two-factor theory

Schachter-Singer two-factor theory: arousal plus a cognitive label. The same racing heart is fear or excitement depending on what you attribute it to.

Broaden-and-build

Broaden-and-build theory: positive **affect** widens attention and builds lasting resources, where negative affect narrows it to the threat.

They differ on *order*: body first, together, or body plus interpretation. Say which order the theory claims.

Four approaches to personality

personality

a person's characteristic pattern of thinking, feeling and behaving

psychodynamic

unconscious conflicts and early experience – historically important, weak on evidence

humanistic

growth toward **self-actualisation** , given **unconditional positive regard**

social-cognitive

behaviour from the **interaction** of person and situation – **reciprocal determinism** , **self-efficacy**

trait

the **Big Five**: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, **agreeableness** , neuroticism

All four are examinable and each answers a different question. The trait approach *describes*; the other three try to *explain*.

Personality, motivation, and the group

Trait theories

Trait theories describe rather than explain: the Big Five, of which **openness to experience** is the one most tied to creativity.

Sensation-seeking

Sensation-seeking theory explains why some people need far more stimulation for the same arousal – and take the risks that follow.

Group polarization

Group polarization: discussion among like-minded people moves the group's average view *further* in that direction.

Reducing conflict

Superordinate goals – a task neither group can achieve alone – cut hostility where contact alone does not.

The **false consensus effect** makes us overestimate how many people agree with us; **social norms** then look stronger than they are.

Four accounts of where personality comes from, in detail

	Psycho-dynamic	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

The **psychodynamic** approach holds that **unconscious** processes drive personality.

Personality: Psychodynamic and Humanistic

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**.

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** .



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** - states that moderate arousal gives the best performance on most tasks.
- **Self-determination theory** separates **intrinsic motivation** (from within) from **extrinsic motivation** (from reward), and **incentive theory** focuses on the pull of rewards.

Motivation: instincts and conflicts

- **Instincts** are innate fixed patterns, seen in non-human animals rather than in human behaviour.
- **Lewin's motivational conflicts** names three: **approach-approach** , **approach-avoidance** , and **avoidance-avoidance** .

Motivation, continued

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

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.

Worked example – evidence plus a course concept

2025 Evidence-Based Question: *“Explain how the evidence from Part B(i) supports your claim using a psychological perspective, theory, concept, or research finding.”*

- **Full marks:** *“Participants performed better on the simple task when observed (Source 1). This supports my claim because social facilitation predicts that an audience improves performance on well-practised tasks and impairs it on difficult ones.”*
- Cite the source, then supply the **course concept** that explains it.

Restating the source is not an explanation. The concept is what turns the evidence into support for the claim.

Exam tips

- **Fundamental attribution error** applies to explaining *others*. If the question is about explaining yourself, the answer is usually **self-serving bias**.
- **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.
- With emotion theories, the difference is **order**: body first (James-Lange), together (Cannon-Bard), or arousal plus label (two-factor).

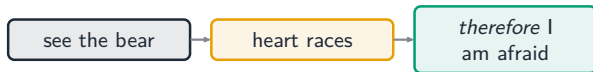
Three theories of emotion

The difference is **order**:

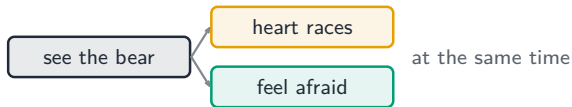
- **James-Lange** - – the body responds first; emotion is the reading of that response
- **Cannon-Bard** - – arousal and emotion occur at once
- **two-factor** (Schachter–Singer) – arousal plus a **cognitive label**

Three theories of emotion, in detail

JAMES-LANGE



CANNON-BARD



SCHACHTER-SINGER



Three theories, three orderings of the same three events



Unit 4 – key takeaways

1

Attribution

FAE for others; self-serving bias
for yourself

2

Social

conformity matches a group;
obedience follows authority

3

Dissonance

name the conflict; the attitude
usually changes

4

Emotion

order: body / together /
arousal+label

Check yourself

- 1 Explaining a stranger's crash as "they are careless": which bias?
- 2 Matching a group's wrong answer: conformity or obedience?
- 3 Body first, then emotion: which theory?
- 4 Name one Big Five trait.

Answers: fundamental attribution error ■ conformity ■ James–Lange ■ e.g. conscientiousness