



The superpowers of the psychology major

Some thoughts on the unique strengths of a psychology major.

By Stephen L. Chew, PhD Date created: August 23, 2021 10 min read

The general public holds many psychological misconceptions that are difficult to correct (Lilienfeld, 2011), but perhaps the most pernicious and enduring misconception is the stereotype about the field of psychology itself. The general stereotype is that it is simply common sense and is not a rigorous science. Also, that psychology majors spend their time analyzing other people or getting in touch with their feelings. Sadly, stereotypes also abound about the people who study psychology, especially undergraduate psychology majors. Brinhaupt and colleagues (Brinhaupt et al., 2012; Brinhaupt et al., 2016) found that stereotypical beliefs about the psychology major included that it is an easy but dead-end major with poor employment prospects and it attracts students who have suffered from mental disorders. Finally, psychology majors may believe that if they don't go on to graduate school, that they aren't really "using" their psychology major.

These negative stereotypes can have seriously harmful consequences. It can lead political leaders to question whether psychology programs should be funded at public universities (Halonen, 2011). It can deter students from considering psychology as a major even if they are fascinated by the subject. Well-meaning family and friends may discourage students from majoring in psychology, worrying that they will "waste their ability" and end up unemployed or underemployed. Most seriously, this negative stereotype can make psychology students defensive or apologetic when sharing their choice of a major with others. I started college as a chemical engineering major. When I decided to change my major to psychology, some of my mentors expressed serious concern. I worried that I was quitting a challenging, respected major for an easy one. I decided I would go ahead and major in psychology but if it didn't work out, I would go back to college and get a nice practical degree in computer science even though I had no interest in it.

Now as a psychology professor, I work constantly to challenge the negative stereotypes around psychology and their consequences. When I talk to prospective psychology majors, the question that virtually always comes up is, "What can I do with a psychology major, especially if I don't want to go to

graduate school?" I have a speech for that question. I suspect every psychology professor does. Fortunately, we also have documentation about the employable skills gained in the psychology major thanks to Drew Appleby (e.g., Appleby, 2018; Appleby et al., 2019) and Paul Hettich (e.g., Hettich, 2016) among many others.

I thought about the negative stereotype when I was invited to speak to students at the 2021 Arkansas Symposium for Psychology Students by Jeremiah Sullins and Shawn Charlton. I wanted to address the negative stereotypes, but instead of challenging the (mis)perceived deficits in the psychology major, I decided to highlight its unique strengths. By unique strengths, I mean the knowledge and skills that psychology majors learn as part of the major that contribute to their overall academic and career success, even if they do not pursue a career in psychology. These strengths are not generally taught in most other majors. I refer to these unique strengths as the superpowers of the psychology major. This positive approach to discussing the major did not come out of the blue. My participation in two APA initiatives, the Summit on National Assessment of Psychology (SNAP) in 2016 and the Introductory Psychology Initiative in 2019 started me thinking about the unique strengths of the psychology major.

I had three goals in my presentation:

- debunk the stereotype that psychology majors do not learn marketable skills;
- list six clear examples of valuable knowledge and skills that psychology majors learn but are not part of most other majors, and
- show students why they should take pride in their psychology major.

I began my talk by recounting the stereotypical comments all psychology majors get from other people. I acknowledged that unlike professional majors like nursing or engineering, there was no direct career path for undergraduates. But then I listed the top four skills sought by employers according to an annual survey by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE Staff, 2019). The most valued skills were critical thinking/problem solving, teamwork/collaboration, professionalism/work ethic, and oral/written communication. These skills had been top rated for three straight years. I pointed out that these skills can be developed within any major.

I then discussed six of the superpowers developed by psychology majors. I described each superpower, talked about how it is acquired in the major, highlighted the advantages associated with the superpower, and, where available, provided, a link to a source for learning more about the superpower. For the sources, I decided against using primary sources and instead included more popular but credible sources such as TED talks. Here are the superpowers I discussed.

You know how to learn effectively

Most people prefer to use the least effective learning strategies. Knowing which strategies best support learning is a huge advantage both academically and in one's career. Psychology majors learn about the constraints on learning, such as selective attention and the limits of working memory both in introductory psychology and cognitive psychology courses. They learn how to avoid or overcome common student pitfalls like multitasking and feeling overconfident about one's knowledge. For this superpower, I linked to my own video on learning during pandemic times (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XOKG2LrnwYo>).

You know how to manage stress and anxiety

Stress is a huge problem in general, but it was particularly challenging for students in the lockdown during the pandemic. In health psychology courses, students learn about cognitive reappraisal, an evidence-based effective coping strategy. Cognitive reappraisal reframes stress as a normal and helpful reaction instead of a completely negative bodily response. My resource for reappraisal is the tremendously popular TED talk by Kelly McGonigal (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RcGyVTAoXEU>). Students also learn about helpful personal attributes like resilience in developmental psychology courses and self-efficacy in personality courses. In neuroscience courses, psychology majors learn about the importance of sleep and exercise for dealing with stress. In a social or positive psychology course, students may learn how service to others, expressions of gratitude, and experiencing awe can also help cope with stress.

You know how to complete a complex task

Designing, conducting, and interpreting research is Goal 2.4 in the *APA Guidelines for the Undergraduate Psychology Major* (APA, 2013). Conducting research is a complex task, and involves a variety of skills, such as identifying an important problem, conducting a literature review, formulating testable hypotheses, designing a controlled study, analyzing data, and presenting the research. Completing an original research project from start to finish takes drive and self-discipline. To maintain internal validity, students must be diligent about the quality of the work throughout the whole process. Although there is no one resource I used to highlight this superpower, I reinforced the importance and value of developing research skills in the major.

You understand personality traits and individual differences

Psychology majors learn about trait theories of personality such as the Big 5 starting in introductory psychology. Knowing an evidence-based framework of major traits gives psychology majors an advantage in understanding how people behave and how they differ. For example, if you are leading a group project and you have a task that requires close attention to detail, you would select the person highest on conscientiousness for that task. Tasks that require innovation and creativity call for openness. Group members high in neuroticism need continued reassurance. There are, of course, many influential traits that psychology majors can learn about in a personality class. To encourage additional learning about this superpower, I provided a link to [Ken Carter's TED talk on sensation seeking behavior](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EJbbMasBSGY) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EJbbMasBSGY>).

You have scientific literacy

Scientific literacy is the use of scientific principles as a way to establish knowledge and make decisions. Psychology students have more instruction in scientific literacy than students in natural science fields (Macias, 2019). Psychology majors are taught the strengths and weaknesses of various scientific methods such as surveys, naturalistic observation, and experiments. Every psychology major knows that correlation is not causation because it is taught in so many psychology classes. The value of scientific literacy was made clear during the COVID-19 pandemic as people tried to make sense of various studies. Understanding concepts such as internal and external validity, quasi-experiments, confounds, and replication, all of which are covered in research methods courses, was incredibly valuable for negotiating the pandemic in the safest possible way. As an example of the value of scientific literacy, I suggested the video, [Interrogating a Causal Claim](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4M94gwjobZk) by Beth Morling (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4M94gwjobZk>).

You know about biases and prejudices

Discussions of biases and prejudices have been at the forefront of current events, from the pandemic to politics to policing. Psychology majors learn about biases and prejudices in introductory psychology and more advanced courses such as social psychology. Students learn about cognitive biases, such as confirmation bias, that can lead to faulty reasoning. They learn about social biases, such as conformity bias and deindividuation that can cause people to act differently when they are part of a group compared to when they are acting as individuals. Psychology majors gain an awareness of these biases and prejudices, which allows them to be on guard against them. To help students learn about implicit bias, I suggested the [TED talk by Jennifer Eberhardt](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rVNb53IkBuc) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rVNb53IkBuc>), a leading researcher on biases and how to address them.

That's six superpowers that psychology majors acquire that will help them be successful in academia and in their careers. And there are other superpowers I could have discussed, such as knowing how to persuade people and knowing how to develop good habits.

These superpowers directly challenge the stereotypical image of psychology majors. Psychology is much more than common sense; it includes information that can help people be healthier and more successful. Psychology majors don't analyze people, they learn to use the best available science to understand human thought and behavior. But what about the notion that the psychology major doesn't prepare students for careers? Let's review the top four skills desired by employers and see how they relate to the superpowers of psychology majors.

- **Critical thinking/problem solving.** For critical thinking, people need to learn effectively, be scientifically literate, and be aware of biases and prejudices.
- **Teamwork/collaboration.** Teamwork and collaboration involve knowing how people differ and avoiding social biases and prejudices to create successful teams.
- **Professionalism/work ethic.** Students who have conducted original research know how to complete a complex task from start to finish. They know how to manage the anxiety and stress along the way.
- **Oral/written communication.** Students develop information literacy skills in conducting a literature review for a research project. When the project is done, they learn how to write a formal report and make a research presentation.

So, the psychology major does indeed provide students with valuable marketable skills. Students should highlight these skills when searching for jobs.

In my presentation, I highlighted six specific superpowers of psychology majors. I created a general version of the presentation (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ra0H1F-214s>), which can be found on YouTube. But beyond highlighting those particular skills, my overall message was this—as psychology majors, students acquire a great deal of valuable knowledge and hone skills that are useful across career fields.

About the author



Stephen L. Chew, PhD, has been a professor of psychology at Samford University since 1993. Trained as a cognitive psychologist, one of his primary research areas is the cognitive basis of effective teaching and learning. His research interests include the use of examples in teaching, the impact of cognitive load on learning, and the tenacious misconceptions that students bring with them into the classroom. He is the creator of a groundbreaking series of YouTube videos for students on how to study effectively in college (<http://www.samford.edu/how-to-study/>) which have been viewed three million

times and are in wide use from high schools to professional schools.

Chew received the Robert S. Daniel Teaching Excellence Award from the Society for the Teaching of Psychology in 2005 as the outstanding teacher of psychology at four-year colleges and universities. He was named the 2011 Outstanding Master's Universities and Colleges U.S. Professor of the Year by the

Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. In 2018 he received the Charles L. Brewer Distinguished Teaching of Psychology Award from the American Psychological Foundation. He is an APA fellow and a distinguished member of Psi Chi.

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