Handout 3-2

Read each description. Determine which subfield in psychology would be most interested in studying the phenomena described.

1. Suicide is now the third leading cause of death (after homicide and accidents) for young people ages 15 to 24. Psychological research indicates that psychological, environmental, and social factors contribute to suicide risk. Warning signs include talking about dying; recent loss (through death, divorce, separation); changes in sleep patterns, eating habits, and the capacity to concentrate; fear of losing control; and no hope for the future. Programs that have proven helpful in preventing suicide include The Teen Screen Program and Stop a Suicide Today! The Teen Screen Program identifies youth who are suffering from a psychological disorder, especially depression. Parents are notified of their children’s problems and given help in connecting them to local mental health services. There, the children can obtain further evaluation and intervention before falling behind in school and ending up in serious trouble, or worst of all, ending their lives. Stop a Suicide Today! is a school-based prevention program with documented success in reducing suicide attempts. The program teaches participants to recognize the signs of suicide in family members, friends, and coworkers and empowers them to make a difference in the lives of their loved ones. The program teaches the relationship between psychological disorder and suicide and supports participants in getting those that they recognize to be in need into psychotherapy.

Berman, A., Jobes, D., & Silverman, M., (2006). Adolescent suicide: Assessment and intervention (2nd ed.). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. Beautrais, A. (2005). National strategies for the reduction and prevention of suicide. Crisis: The Journal of Crisis Intervention and Suicide Prevention,.26(1), 1–3.

2. Psychologists have shown how the pursuit of material wealth and the pursuit of happiness are not the same. Psychologists Edward Diener and David Myers have clearly documented that once individuals have enough money to pay for their basic needs of food, shelter, and so on, money does relatively little to improve happiness. More recently, psychologist Tim Kasser showed that people who buy into the messages of consumer culture actually report lower personal wellbeing. He found that individuals who say that money, image, and popularity are relatively important to them report less satisfaction in life as well as more depression and anxiety. A movement known as Voluntary Simplicity aims to help people live outside the consumer mainstream. Many in this movement try to maximize their “time affluence” rather than their material affluence, because they recognize that increased free time will bring them a greater sense of wellbeing.

Kasser, T. (2002). The high price of materialism. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. Myers, D. (2000). The funds, friends, and faith of happy people. American Psychologist, 55, 56–67.

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3. Researchers are discovering the types of messages that shape pro-environment behaviors. Robert Cialdini and two graduate students worked with a local hotel on a program to encourage lodgers to reuse bath towels. They tried the following messages: Help the hotel save energy; Help save the environment; Partner with us to help save the environment; Help save resources for future generations; and Join your fellow citizens in helping to save the environment. The last message, which described a social norm, was the most successful: 41 percent of guests who got that message recycled their towels. The least successful message was the one that emphasized the benefit to the hotel (Help the hotel save energy): only 20 percent of the guests reused their towels. The findings are consistent with social psychological theory suggesting that people in a new situation take their cues from others. Descriptive norms that say, “Everybody’s doing it!” seem to promote conservation-minded behaviors. In related research on situations requiring people not to do something, some investigators have found that injunctive-proscriptive messages (Don’t go off the trail, or Don’t take the petrified wood) may be the most effective and direct route to gaining compliance. Still other research finds that the typical “save the planet” awareness campaigns are ineffective due to their lack of specificity. Specific messages are much more likely than abstract messages to shape behavior.

Cialdini, R. B. (2003). Crafting normative messages to protect the environment. Current Directions in Psychological Science, 12, 105–109. Cialdini, R. B., Barrett, D. W., Bator, R., Demaine, L., Sagarin, B. J., Rhoads, K. V. L., & Winter, P. L.(2006). Managing social norms for persuasive impact. Social Influence, 1, 315.

4. Writing about difficult, even traumatic, experiences appears to be good for health. In one study, 50 healthy undergraduates were assigned to write about either traumatic experiences or superficial topics for four days in a row. Six weeks after the writing sessions, students in the trauma group reported more positive moods and fewer illnesses than those writing about everyday experiences. In another study, researchers assigned patients with asthma and rheumatoid arthritis either to write about the most stressful events of their lives or to write about a neutral topic. Four months later, asthma patients in the experimental group showed improvements in lung function; arthritis patients in the experimental group showed a reduction in disease severity. Writing seems to be one important way for people to resist the mental and physical ravages of stress and disease. Therapists increasingly encourage patients to undertake writing exercises outside the clinical setting.

Pennebaker, J. W. (1997). Opening up: The healing power of expressing emotion. New York: Guilford Press. Smyth, J. M., Stone, A. A., Hurewitz, A., & Kaell, A. (1999). Effects of writing about stressful experiences on symptom reduction in patients with asthma or rheumatoid arthritis. Journal of the American Medical Association, 281, 1304–1309.

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5. Psychological research indicates that violent video games can increase children’s aggression. Studies indicate that it is likely that violent video games may have even stronger effects on children’s aggression than television or movies because (1) the games are highly engaging and interactive, (2) the games reward violent behavior, and (3) children repeat these behaviors over and over as they play. Researchers have shown that playing a lot of violent video games is related to having more aggressive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. When parents limit the amount of time as well as the types of games their children play, children are less likely to show aggressive behaviors. Some researchers have created school curricula to help teach children to reduce their total amount of screen time and/or the types of programs and games watched/played.

Gentile, D. A., & Anderson, C. A. (2003). Violent video games: The newest media violence hazard. In D. A. Gentile (Ed.), Media violence and children. Westport, CT: Praeger. Gentile, D. A., Lynch, P. J., Linder, J. R., & Walsh, D. A. (2004). The effects of violent video game habits on adolescent aggressive attitudes and behaviors. Journal of Adolescence, 27, 5–22.

6. Most psychologists agree that polygraph tests cannot accurately detect lies. Indeed, research cannot find any pattern of physiological reactions that is unique to deception. An honest person may be nervous when answering truthfully and a dishonest person may be calm. A particular problem is that polygraph research has not separated placebo-like effects (the individual’s belief in the efficacy of the procedure) from the actual relationship between deception and a person’s physiological responses. One reason that polygraph tests may appear to be accurate is that people who believe the test works may confess or become very anxious when questioned. If this view is correct, the lie detector might be better called a “fear” detector. Courts, including the U.S. Supreme Court, have repeatedly rejected the use of polygraph evidence because of its inherent unreliability. Nevertheless, polygraph testing continues to be used in nonjudicial settings, often to screen personnel but sometimes to try to assess the veracity of suspects and witnesses, and to monitor criminal offenders on probation.

Kozel, F. A., Padgett, T. M., & George, M. S. (2004). A replication study of the neural correlates of deception. Behavioral Neuroscience, 118(4), 852–856. Lykken, D. (1998). A tremor in the blood: Uses and abuses of the lie detector (2nd ed.). New York: Perseus. National Academy of Sciences (2002). The polygraph and lie detection. Washington, DC: National Academy Press