

Perceived Real-Life Benefits of an AP Psychology Course: A Single-Site Survey of High School Students

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AP Psychology is a popular high school course often credited with promoting personal and academic growth, yet research on its tangible impact at the high school level is limited. This study aimed to examine students' perceived real-life benefits of AP Psychology beyond exam scores or college credit. A cross-sectional self-report survey was conducted at a single large high school in northwestern Washington State, with 89 AP Psychology students participating. The survey included multiple-choice Likert-scale items and open-ended questions. Students retrospectively self-rated their understanding of human behavior before versus after the course and identified personal skills gained. Of the 89 students, 84% indicated that AP Psychology improved their understanding of others' behavior, and 72% reported better self-understanding. Mean self-rated confidence in analyzing behavior increased from 2.67 to 3.85 on a 5-point scale. Additionally, 93% found course concepts applicable to daily life, and 97% would recommend the course. Qualitative responses echoed these outcomes, describing increased empathy, self-awareness, and stress-management skills. In conclusion, students at this site perceived AP Psychology as more than an academic subject, crediting it with fostering social-emotional skills and critical thinking. These perception-based findings suggest the course may support personal growth not captured by test scores.

Keywords: AP Psychology; high school; perceived benefits; social-emotional learning; survey research.

Introduction

Advanced Placement (AP) courses have become a pillar of rigorous secondary education over the past few decades, with millions of exams taken annually by high school students seeking college-level academic experiences¹⁻³. AP Psychology in particular has surged in popularity, reflecting students' growing interest in understanding human behavior and mental processes. In 2021 alone, approximately 262,700 high school students worldwide took the AP Psychology exam⁴, making it one of the most widely taken AP subjects. Educators and researchers alike note that psychology's appeal lies not only in its engaging content but also in its potential to cultivate valuable skills and insights. Studying psychology can help students develop stronger critical thinking and gain self- and social awareness, which are competencies essential for success in both academic and real-life contexts^{5,6}.

Despite the expansion of AP courses and claims about their benefits, there is a distinct gap in the literature regarding students' perceived real-life benefits of specific AP classes like psychology. Most research on the AP program has focused on academic outcomes (e.g., exam performance, college credit, or long-term academic success) rather than personal growth or skill development as perceived by students. For example, prior studies indicate that AP students tend to outperform non-AP

peers on certain academic measures, but these findings often derive from observational data without isolating the unique contributions of AP courses^{2,3}. Even the first experimental study on AP (focused on science courses) found only "suggestive evidence" of subject-specific skill gains (in science reasoning) and increased interest in STEM, alongside some negative effects such as higher stress and lower academic confidence^{2,3}. While such studies shed light on academic impacts, they do not directly address how students themselves perceive the real-life applicability of what they learn in AP classes. In the context of AP Psychology, scholarly attention has largely overlooked questions like: Do students feel that taking AP Psychology enriches their daily life skills? Does it help them think more critically or understand themselves and others better^{7,8}? These questions remain under-explored, revealing a clear problem space and gap in existing research on high school psychology education.

The present study responds to this gap by examining high school students' perceptions of the real-life benefits gained from an AP Psychology course. The central problem this research addresses is the lack of empirical knowledge about whether and how an AP Psychology class translates into perceived improvements in students' skills or personal development beyond the classroom. To articulate this problem: few, if any, studies have specifically investigated high school students' self-reported benefits from AP Psychology in terms of applicable skills or

social-emotional growth, leaving educators uncertain about the broader value of the course from the student perspective. By identifying this gap, we establish the rationale for our investigation.

Purpose and Research Objectives

In light of the above, the purpose of this single-site survey study is to explore and document the perceived real-life benefits that students derive from taking AP Psychology. We aim to clearly determine what kinds of skills or competencies students believe they have developed or enhanced through the course. The research objectives include: (1) assessing students' self-reported development in critical cognitive skills – specifically critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and interpretive ability – as a result of taking AP Psychology; (2) investigating any perceived gains in social-emotional understanding or personal growth that align with the course content (such as greater self-awareness or empathy for others); and (3) contextualizing these perceived benefits within relevant educational frameworks to better understand and interpret the findings. Importantly, the study focuses on students' perceptions and does not assume that the course caused these outcomes, thereby avoiding unwarranted causal claims. Instead, it seeks to gather students' subjective evaluations of how AP Psychology may have benefitted them in everyday life.

Theoretical Framework

Two frameworks guided the design and interpretation of this study: Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) theory and Bloom's Taxonomy of cognitive domains. SEL theory provides a lens for understanding how a course like AP Psychology might contribute to students' intrapersonal and interpersonal development. Social-Emotional Learning is broadly defined as the process through which individuals acquire and apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, establish positive relationships, and make responsible decisions^{5,6}. In educational settings, SEL-based approaches aim to foster competencies such as self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship skills alongside academic learning. By its very nature, psychology as a subject delves into human thoughts, emotions, and behaviors; thus, one might expect that studying psychology helps students better understand themselves and others – an outcome consistent with SEL competencies. Proponents of SEL in schools argue that integrating such learning can increase students' motivation, empathy, and ability to navigate social situations^{5,6}. In this study, SEL theory guides our interpretation of any reported benefits related to students' emotional intelligence, empathy, or personal growth from the AP Psychology course.

Complementing the SEL perspective, Bloom's Taxonomy

offers a cognitive framework to examine the academic skill development that AP Psychology may promote. Bloom's Taxonomy classifies cognitive learning objectives in a hierarchy from lower-order to higher-order thinking skills^{9,10}. The classic taxonomy⁹ and its later revisions¹⁰ delineate levels such as remember and understand at the basic end, progressing through apply and analyze, up to evaluate and create at the highest levels of cognitive complexity. AP courses are designed to be rigorous and inquiry-oriented, often pushing students into higher-order thinking. The College Board explicitly states that AP classes engage students in analysis of evidence and independent thinking, expecting them to draw their own conclusions rather than memorize facts⁴. AP Psychology, for example, requires students to not only learn psychological concepts but also apply theories to scenarios, interpret data from studies, and evaluate claims about behavior. By situating our study in Bloom's framework, we can better interpret students' reports of skill gains: if many perceive an improvement in analytical or critical thinking, it would be consistent with the higher-level cognitive work encouraged by the AP curriculum. Likewise, an increase in interpretive skills (for instance, interpreting case studies or psychological findings) would reflect movement beyond basic comprehension to deeper understanding and analysis – levels highlighted in Bloom's taxonomy as educational goals.

Definition of Key Constructs

In assessing students' perceived skill improvements, this study focuses on three constructs – critical thinking, analytical skills, and interpretive ability. For clarity and consistency, we adopt the following definitions from the literature for each term:

- **Critical thinking** – a form of directed, problem-focused thinking in which an individual tests ideas or possible solutions for errors or drawbacks¹¹. In other words, critical thinking entails actively evaluating information and arguments, questioning assumptions, and making reasoned judgments. It is widely regarded as a fundamental skill for problem-solving and decision-making in academic and real-life situations.
- **Analytical skills** – the cognitive abilities that allow an individual to process information methodically and draw inferences from it⁸. Possessing strong analytical skills means one can break down complex problems or concepts into smaller components, identify patterns or relationships between variables, scrutinize evidence, and logically solve problems or make decisions based on that analysis. These skills underpin tasks ranging from scientific research to everyday reasoning.
- **Interpretive ability** – the capacity to make sense of and explain the meaning of information or experiences¹². This

involves analyzing text or data, drawing conclusions, and forming insights based on evidence. Strong interpretive skills enable a student to understand underlying meanings and nuances – for example, interpreting the results of a psychology experiment or the subtext of a written passage – and to appreciate different perspectives.

By defining these key constructs, we ensure that our survey questions and analysis have a clear focus. We specifically examine whether students feel their AP Psychology experience has enhanced their critical thinking (e.g. questioning and evaluating information), their analytical reasoning (e.g. ability to dissect problems and data), and their interpretive skills (e.g. understanding and explaining complex content).

Scope and Limitations

The scope of this study is limited to one high school's AP Psychology program. Findings should be interpreted as context-specific perceptions rather than generalizable results.

Methods

Study Design

This study utilized a cross-sectional, perception-based survey design. The goal was to capture students' self-reported perceptions of real-life benefits after completing an AP Psychology course at a single high school. All data were collected at one point in time (March 2025) via an anonymous questionnaire, focusing on subjective experiences rather than objective performance outcomes. This design emphasizes breadth of feedback at a single time-point and does not include any experimental manipulation or control group.

Participants

Participants were 89 high school students enrolled in AP Psychology, out of 118 total eligible students invited (75.4% response rate). These students ranged from 9th to 12th grade, representing all high school grade levels. All participants were from the same school (suburban school near a major metro), reflecting a single-site sample. The sample was one of convenience (all students in the AP Psychology classes at the school were invited), and no additional inclusion or exclusion criteria were applied beyond enrollment in the course. Demographic information (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity) was not collected to maintain high level of anonymity.

Recruitment and Data Collection

AP Psychology teachers facilitated recruitment by announcing the survey during class. In March 2025, instructors briefly dis-

played a slide in their classrooms containing a Google Forms link (and QR code) to the online survey. Students were informed that participation was voluntary and anonymous, and they could complete the survey on their own devices at their convenience. The survey link remained open for a designated period (approximately one week) to allow students ample time to respond. No course credit, grades, or other incentives were offered for participation. All responses were submitted electronically directly to the student researcher, and no data were collected by teachers, ensuring that teachers did not know who did or did not participate.

Survey Instrument

The data were collected using a custom-designed survey administered via Google Forms. The survey was brief, with an estimated completion time of approximately 3–5 minutes. It consisted of a mix of question formats to gather both quantitative and qualitative feedback. Specifically, the instrument included:

- **Likert-scale items** – e.g., statements such as “I am more aware of how psychology applies to everyday life,” rated from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).
- **Multiple-choice questions** – e.g., asking which AP Psychology unit or topic (such as Sleep, Social Psychology, etc.) the student found most applicable to daily life, with several course units provided as options.
- **Yes/No questions** – e.g., “Would you recommend the AP Psychology course to other students?” (Yes or No).
- **Open-ended question** – inviting students to comment in their own words on any other perceived benefits or insights gained from the course.

The survey was self-constructed by the researchers and tailored to the context of the AP Psychology course. No formal pilot testing of the questionnaire was conducted prior to administration. However, the questions were reviewed for clarity by the research advisor and AP Psychology teachers. A custom instrument was used because no standardized, validated scale was available that precisely matched this study's focus on perceived real-life benefits of AP Psychology in a high-school context. The full survey instrument, including consent language and all items, is provided in Appendix A.

Variables and Measurement

The survey measured several key variables related to students' perceived skill development and personal growth from the course. The primary constructs of interest were: critical thinking skills, self-awareness/understanding of oneself and others, and ability to apply psychological content to real-life situations.

Each of these constructs was assessed through one or more Likert-scale items asking students to reflect on any changes or benefits they attributed to taking AP Psychology (for example, an item on self-awareness asked whether students felt they “became more aware of their own thoughts and behaviors” as a result of the course). Higher Likert ratings corresponded to a greater perceived improvement or benefit in the given area.

In addition, the survey included a specific self-assessment of confidence before vs. after the course. For this item, students were prompted to retrospectively rate their confidence in applying psychology to real life before taking AP Psychology and after completing AP Psychology, each on a 5-point scale (with 1 = not at all confident, and 5 = very confident). Both ratings were collected at the end of the course as a single, retrospective reflection. It is important to note that this was not a true pre–post measurement, but rather a post-course look-back; as such, it relied on students’ memory and subjective recall of their prior confidence levels. This retrospective format introduces potential memory and response-shift biases, because students’ understanding of concepts like “confidence” may have evolved during the course. Therefore, the before/after confidence results are interpreted cautiously and used only as an exploratory indication of perceived change, not as a rigorous pre–post comparison of effectiveness.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

Survey responses to closed-ended questions (Likert-scale, multiple-choice, and yes/no items) were analyzed using descriptive statistics. For each item, the number and percentage of students selecting each response option were calculated to summarize the distribution of answers. Measures of central tendency and variability were also computed where appropriate. In particular, for Likert-scale items treated as ordinal ratings, the mean and standard deviation of ratings were reported (along with the median for context, given the ordinal nature of Likert data). To convey the precision of estimates, 95% confidence intervals (CIs) were calculated for key proportions (percentage of students endorsing particular options) and for mean rating values. For the retrospective confidence rating item, the average “before” score and “after” score were tabulated (Mean_{before} = 2.67 and Mean_{after} = 3.85 on the 1–5 scale). These two means are presented descriptively to illustrate the direction of change in self-reported confidence. No formal statistical significance testing was performed on the before/after retrospective ratings, in recognition that they are subjective post hoc assessments rather than independent pre- and post-measures. All quantitative analyses were conducted using spreadsheet software, and results are reported with appropriate summary statistics (n, %, M, SD) and uncertainty intervals as noted.

Qualitative Analysis

The single open-ended question yielded free-response data, which were analyzed qualitatively using an inductive thematic coding approach. One researcher (the student author) served as the sole coder for this qualitative analysis. The coding procedure followed these steps:

1. **Immersion in data:** All written responses were read in full several times to gain familiarity with the content and overall sentiment.
2. **Open coding:** The coder examined each response line by line and assigned initial labels or codes to segments of text that represented distinct ideas or types of benefits mentioned (without using any pre-established code list).
3. **Theme development:** The initial codes were then reviewed and similar or related codes were grouped together into broader themes. These themes emerged inductively from the data (for example, codes related to “understanding others’ behavior” and “improved empathy” might be grouped under a theme of Social understanding).
4. **Frequency analysis:** Finally, the frequency of responses associated with each theme was counted to identify which perceived benefit themes were most common among respondents. Representative quotes were noted for each theme to illustrate typical student comments.

Because only a single coder performed the qualitative coding, no inter-coder reliability statistics could be calculated. The thematic groupings and interpretations were, however, discussed with the research advisor to ensure they appeared reasonable and grounded in the data. The qualitative results are used to complement the quantitative findings, providing context and examples of how students describe the benefits of the AP Psychology course in their own words.

Analytic scope and missing data

Analyses were conducted at the item level rather than at the construct level. Each survey item was summarized individually (frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations, 95% CIs). Because the survey was exploratory and self-constructed, items were not aggregated into scales and no reliability coefficients (e.g., Cronbach’s α) were calculated. Missing data were handled listwise: only fully completed surveys were retained for analysis, leaving N = 89 usable responses in the final dataset. This approach provides transparent item-level estimates but limits psychometric rigor and precludes internal-consistency checks.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted with approval from school administration. Formal parental consent was not collected; instead, students were presented with an informed consent/assent statement at the start of the online survey consistent with school policy for minimal-risk student projects. Participation was voluntary and anonymous; students could skip any question or stop at any time. No personally identifying information was collected. Teachers did not collect or view individual responses, and participation had no effect on course grades or standing. Given the minimal-risk, educational nature of the project, these procedures were aligned with ethical guidelines for student-led research. (Limitations explicitly note that the absence of parental consent may limit replicability in settings requiring IRB oversight.)

Data and Materials Availability

The study materials and data are available for educational or replication purposes upon reasonable request. An anonymized dataset (with all survey responses, stripped of any identifiers) and the complete survey instrument (questionnaire) can be obtained to allow verification of results or re-analysis. The qualitative coding framework (codebook of themes derived from open-ended responses) can also be made available. Researchers or educators interested in these materials may contact the author to request access.

Results

Perceived Understanding (Self and Others)

Out of 89 surveyed students, 75 reported that AP Psychology improved their understanding of other people's behavior (84.3%, 95% CI [75.3%, 90.4%]). In addition, 64 students indicated that the course helped them better understand themselves – including their own motivations and personality – (71.9%, 95% CI [61.8%, 80.2%]). These high proportions suggest that a clear majority of students perceived gains in both social awareness (understanding others) and self-awareness as a result of the course. In sum, most participants agreed that AP Psychology enhanced their insight into both others' behavior and their own behavior.

Real-Life Application

Students overwhelmingly felt that the skills and knowledge from AP Psychology were applicable to their daily lives. Specifically, 83 out of 89 respondents answered "Yes" when asked if what they learned in class was useful in real life (93.3%, 95% CI [86.1%, 96.9%]). Similarly, 86 students said they would recommend the course to others (96.6%, 95% CI [90.6%, 98.8%]), reflecting a broad endorsement of the course's value. These

findings indicate that nearly all students saw direct real-life relevance in the material, not just academic benefit. In summary, the vast majority of participants reported using concepts from AP Psychology beyond the classroom and would encourage their peers to take the course.

Confidence Ratings (Retrospective Self-Assessment)

Students provided retrospective self-ratings of their understanding of human behavior before versus after taking AP Psychology. On a 1–5 scale (5 = highest confidence), the mean self-rated understanding before the course was $M = 2.67$ ($SD \approx 0.95$, median = 3.0, 95% CI [2.47, 2.87]). After completing the course, the mean confidence rating rose to $M = 3.85$ ($SD \approx 0.84$, median = 4.0, 95% CI [3.68, 4.02]). This reflects a retrospective increase of about 1.18 points in perceived understanding of human behavior. It should be noted that these ratings were collected at the end of the course (i.e., students recalled their "before" confidence), so this is not a true pre–post measurement. No formal statistical test was conducted on this change due to the retrospective design; however, the descriptive increase in scores suggests that students felt more confident in their ability to interpret behavior after the class. In short, students reported substantially higher confidence in understanding human behavior by the end of the course, although this self-assessed gain should be interpreted with caution.

Topic Relevance

When asked which specific content areas from AP Psychology were most applicable to their lives, students most frequently selected topics related to everyday behaviors and well-being. The Sleep unit was identified as relevant by 63 students (70.8%, 95% CI [60.6%, 79.2%]), making it the top choice. Other highly applicable units were Social Psychology (53 students, 59.6% [49.2%, 69.1%]), Personality (52 students, 58.4% [48.0%, 68.1%]), and core concepts of Behavior (52 students, 58.4% [48.0%, 68.1%]). Over half of the respondents also selected Motivation (48 students, 53.9% [43.6%, 63.9%]) as a useful topic. These results indicate that students gravitated toward course topics that have clear connections to daily life—such as understanding sleep habits, social interactions, and individual personality differences. In summary, units dealing with personal health, social behavior, and individual traits were perceived as the most useful for students' day-to-day experiences.

Qualitative Themes

Analysis of the open-ended survey question (asking for "the single most useful benefit" gained from AP Psychology) yielded several recurring themes. The most common theme in students' responses was understanding others better. Many students described greater empathy or insight into other people's thoughts,

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for Key Outcomes (N = 89)

Measure	Item / Outcome	n (endorsing)	%	M	SD	Median	95% CI
Perceived understanding of others	Agreement (Yes)	75	84.3	—	—	—	[75.3, 90.4]
Perceived self-understanding	Agreement (Yes)	64	71.9	—	—	—	[61.8, 80.2]
Real-life applicability	“Yes”	83	93.3	—	—	—	[86.1, 96.9]
Recommend course	“Yes”	86	96.6	—	—	—	[90.6, 98.8]
Confidence (retrospective “before”)	1–5 scale	—	—	2.67	0.95	3.00	[2.47, 2.87]
Confidence (retrospective “after”)	1–5 scale	—	—	3.85	0.84	4.00	[3.68, 4.02]

Note. CI = confidence interval; SD = standard deviation; “Agreement” rows report counts/percent among N = 89. Confidence rows are retrospective self-ratings collected at end of course; values are descriptive only (no pre–post inference).

emotions, and behaviors. For example, one student noted that after taking the course they are now more aware of “how others react in stressful situations”, reflecting improved social awareness and perspective-taking. Another prominent theme was increased self-awareness as numerous students mentioned they became more conscious of their own emotions, habits, and thought processes (e.g., “becoming more self-aware” was a typical response). These qualitative insights align with the quantitative findings that 84.3% felt the class helped them understand others and 71.9% felt it helped them understand themselves.

Students also frequently mentioned stress management as a real-life benefit. They reported applying psychological knowledge to cope with stress and improve mental health. For instance, a student wrote that they are “managing stress better” thanks to strategies learned in class. Improved communication and relationships was another recurring category – some students explained that they now handle conflicts or conversations differently, leading to “improved communication in relationships.” Additionally, several respondents pointed to concrete behavioral changes such as prioritizing sleep or adjusting their study habits, directly attributing these positive changes to lessons from the course. These comments illustrate that students were actively using psychology concepts to modify their daily routines and interactions.

Table 2 provides an integrated view of the quantitative and qualitative results, linking key survey findings with representative quotes from students. As shown in the table, for each major benefit area (e.g., understanding others, applying to life, etc.), a high percentage of students agreed with the survey item, and the open-ended responses offer personal examples that illustrate those statistical trends. This mixed-methods approach strengthens the results by showing how the numbers and students’ own words together paint a consistent picture of AP Psychology’s real-life impact.

In summary, the qualitative data reinforced the survey results:

students consistently emphasized personal growth outcomes such as empathy, self-understanding, stress reduction, better communication, and healthier habits. These student testimonials provide context to the numeric findings, confirming that AP Psychology was widely perceived as yielding practical, real-life benefits beyond the academic curriculum. Each subsection of results, from perceived understanding to applicable topics, tells a similar story: the course is regarded by students as a meaningful contributor to their social and emotional development in addition to their knowledge of psychology. The convergence of quantitative and qualitative evidence strengthens confidence in the conclusion that, at this site, AP Psychology had a positive perceived impact on students’ lives outside of the classroom.

Discussion

Interpretation of Key Findings

This study explored students’ perceived real-life benefits of AP Psychology, focusing on their self-reported skill gains, applicability of course content, and retrospective confidence in understanding human behavior. The quantitative results show that a large majority of students reported improved understanding of others (84.3%) and themselves (71.9%), with high ratings of real-life relevance (93.3%) and willingness to recommend the course (96.6%). These findings align with the qualitative themes of increased empathy, self-awareness, and stress management^{13–16}. Together, the results suggest that students at this site perceived AP Psychology as a course that extended beyond academics, contributing to personal development and social-emotional growth.

Integration with Theoretical Frameworks

The findings can be interpreted through Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) theory, which posits that students benefit from in-

Table 2 Representative Student Quotes Linked to Quantitative Findings (N = 89)

Quantitative Finding (Survey Result)	Representative Student Quote	Grade	Theme
75/89 students (84.3%) reported better understanding others (95% CI [75.3%, 90.4%])	“Now I notice how others react in stressful situations, and I understand why.”	11	Empathy/Social Awareness
64/89 students (71.9%) reported better understanding themselves (95% CI [61.8%, 80.2%])	“AP Psych made me much more self-aware about my own feelings and behaviors.”	12	Self-Insight/Personal Growth
83/89 students (93.3%) felt the course was applicable to daily life (95% CI [86.1%, 96.9%])	“I can manage stress better now by using techniques we learned.”	10	Stress Management / Life Skills
63/89 students (70.8%) found the Sleep unit relevant to their life (95% CI [60.6%, 79.2%])	“After learning about sleep’s importance, I started aiming for a full 8 hours each night.”	11	Healthy Habits
86/89 students (96.6%) would recommend AP Psychology to others (95% CI [90.6%, 98.8%])	“This class is so useful, I’ve told all my friends to take it next year.”	11	General Satisfaction

Note. CIs in brackets are 95%. Grade indicates respondent’s grade level. Each quote is from a different student. Themes were derived from inductive coding of open-ended responses.

struction that enhances self-awareness, relationship skills, and decision-making. Many students reported using course concepts to improve their relationships, manage stress, and understand others, which aligns with SEL competencies. Similarly, within Bloom’s Taxonomy, students’ reports of improved critical thinking and analytical skills reflect movement toward higher-order cognitive processes such as analysis and evaluation, consistent with the goals of advanced placement coursework^{12,17–20}.

Context and Limitations

It is important to interpret these results in light of the study’s context. The sample was limited to a single high school and one AP Psychology program, which may have unique characteristics (teacher style, school culture, student demographics). Additionally, the survey relied on self-reported perceptions, which are subjective and may be influenced by recall bias, especially for the retrospective “before” confidence rating. Without a control group of students who did not take AP Psychology, it is not possible to determine whether the reported benefits were unique to the course or reflect general maturation or exposure to any rigorous AP class. These factors limit the generalizability of the findings and preclude causal conclusions.

Because this study was exploratory and relied on a self-constructed survey, items were analyzed individually rather than aggregated into validated scales. Standardized instruments with established reliability and norms were not available for the specific constructs of interest in this high school AP Psychology context, so internal consistency metrics (e.g., Cronbach’s α), dimensionality analyses, and composite scores were not cal-

culated. As a result, constructs such as critical thinking and self-awareness were measured with single items rather than multi-item scales, which limits psychometric rigor and restricts confidence in the internal consistency of the measures. Accordingly, the findings should be viewed as descriptive perceptions rather than evidence of causal effects.

This research also did not include a control or comparison group (e.g., students in other AP courses), preventing us from determining whether the reported benefits are unique to AP Psychology or simply reflect general developmental changes or exposure to rigorous coursework. Because students who choose AP classes may already differ from non-AP peers in motivation and ability, no causal claims can be made. We do not assert that “AP Psychology improves critical thinking” or any other skill; rather, we report on students’ perceptions of improvement within this single context.

Qualitative analysis was conducted by a single coder, which may introduce coder bias. Although responses were reviewed multiple times for consistency and themes were discussed with an advisor, no inter-coder reliability statistics (e.g., Cohen’s κ) could be calculated. Future research should include multiple coders and measure agreement to increase the rigor of qualitative findings.

An additional limitation is that parental consent was not obtained; only student assent was collected prior to participation. While this approach followed school-level guidelines for minimal-risk projects, it may limit replicability in research settings requiring parental consent or IRB oversight.

Finally, as a cross-sectional survey, this study captures a snap-

shot at one point in time and cannot examine whether perceived benefits persist in the long term. Longitudinal or mixed-method studies would be needed to explore durability and to triangulate perceptions with objective outcomes such as academic performance or behavioral change.

In terms of missing-data handling, only fully completed surveys were included in the analysis. Any partially completed surveys were excluded listwise, which may introduce bias if non-completers differed systematically from those who finished the survey.

Overall, this study is exploratory and descriptive in nature. Its purpose was to illuminate what benefits, if any, students believe they gained from AP Psychology and to interpret those perceptions through the lenses of Social-Emotional Learning theory and Bloom's Taxonomy. By acknowledging these limitations, we temper our conclusions, avoid overgeneralization, and provide a foundation for future research into the real-life impact of advanced high school courses.

Implications

Despite these limitations, the results highlight that students view AP Psychology as relevant and personally meaningful. This suggests that schools may consider promoting AP Psychology not only as a college-prep course but also as a way to support students' social-emotional learning. Educators and policymakers might integrate psychology-related curricula more broadly to foster critical thinking, empathy, and well-being in adolescents.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies could strengthen the evidence base by:

- Using validated survey instruments with established reliability and construct validity.
- Conducting multi-site studies to increase generalizability and examine whether findings hold across different school contexts.
- Including a comparison group of students not enrolled in AP Psychology to help differentiate course-specific effects from general developmental changes.
- Collecting true pre- and post-course data rather than retrospective self-ratings to reduce memory bias.
- Examining potential long-term effects on academic performance, mental health, and postsecondary outcomes.

Closing Thought

This study offers a student-centered view of AP Psychology's value, showing that many students perceive it as a course that

helps them understand themselves and others while developing life skills. While further research is needed to confirm these benefits objectively, these findings suggest that psychology education at the high school level may play an important role in supporting both academic and personal growth.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Appendix A

Survey Instrument: Perceived Real-Life Benefits of AP Psychology

The following survey was administered to AP Psychology students in March 2025. Items are reproduced as they appeared in the Google Form.

Section 1: Consent and Instructions

This survey is anonymous and voluntary. Your responses will not affect your grade in any way. You may skip any question or stop at any time. Teachers will not see your individual responses. By clicking Next, you are giving your consent to participate.

Section 2: Demographics

Q1. What is your grade level?

- 9th
- 10th
- 11th
- 12th

Section 3: Perceptions of AP Psychology

- Q2. AP Psychology improved my understanding of other people’s behavior.
Q3. AP Psychology improved my understanding of myself (my thoughts, feelings, or behaviors).
Q4. I am more aware of how psychology applies to everyday life.
(Response scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree)

Section 4: Confidence Ratings

- Q5. Before taking AP Psychology, how confident were you in analyzing human behavior?
Q6. After completing AP Psychology, how confident are you in analyzing human behavior?
(Response scale: 1 = Not at all confident; 5 = Very confident)

Section 5: Course Relevance

- Q7. Which AP Psychology topics did you find most relevant to daily life?
(Select all that apply)
- Biological Bases of Behavior
 - Sensation & Perception
 - Consciousness & Sleep
 - Learning
 - Developmental Psychology
 - Motivation & Emotion
 - Personality
 - Social Psychology
 - Abnormal Psychology
 - Treatment of Disorders
 - Other (please specify)
- Q8. Would you recommend AP Psychology to other students?
- Yes
 - No

Section 6: Open-Ended Response

Q9. What is the single most useful benefit you have gained from AP Psychology? Please describe in your own words.

Appendix B

Coded themes from student responses on the most useful benefit of AP Psychology.

Theme	Representative Quote	Frequency (approx.)
Understanding Others	Being able to understand my friends and the people around me.	12+
Self-Awareness	Learning why people act the way they act.	10+
Stress & Emotion Management	Understanding stress or mental health and how the brain reacts to past events.	8+
Sleep & Habits	Fixing my sleep schedule.	7+
	Learning how important things like sleep are.	
Analytical Thinking	I can understand better how people think, and why people act the ways that they do.	5+
Behavioral Insight	Learning how there are a million different things happening for one action.	6+
Study & Recall Strategies	Learning about different styles of learning and how to study more efficiently.	4+
Social Psychology Concepts	Social psychology was most interesting and most applicable to my real life.	3+
Note-Taking/Academic Growth	Note taking skills. I took a lot of notes... helped me learn how to organize information.	3
Minimal or No Gain	Not much.	3
	Just a fun CTE credit I guess.	