Approaches to Psychology

The Different Approaches

The problems you wish to investigate are tied to a number of theoretical approaches to psychology. There are six basic approaches to the study of psychology (some psychologists also include a seventh approach).

Seven Approaches

1. Evolutionary
2. Biological
3. Behavioral
4. Cognitive
5. Humanistic
6. Psychodynamic
7. Sociocultural
Application

- How do you explain the causes of depression?
- How do you examine the personality of an assassin?

Application #2

- How can we explain the power of cult leaders?
- What social conditions exist that promote the rise of cults?

Application #3

- How could you investigate the causes of mental illness?
Application #4

How could you explain the reasons for obedience to authority?

Application #5

How could you achieve a better understanding of why a person would commit suicide?

Application #6

Where would you look if you wanted to understand how and why some people seem so extraordinary and important in our society?
Overview of Each Approach

- **Biological**: Focuses primarily on the activities of the nervous system, the brain, hormones, and genetics
- **Psychodynamic**: Emphasizes internal, unconscious conflicts; the focus is on sexual and aggressive instincts that collide with cultural norms

Overview (cont.)

- **Behavioral**: Examines the learning process, focusing in particular on the influence of rewards and punishments
- **Evolutionary**: Investigates how primal survival instincts can influence behavior

Overview (cont.)

- **Cognitive**: Focuses on the mechanisms through which people receive, store, and process information
- **Humanistic**: Emphasizes an individual’s potential for growth and the role of perception in guiding mental processes and behavior
Sociocultural: Explores how behavior is shaped by history, society, and culture

The Evolutionary Approach
- Functionalism
- Why we do what we do
- The influence of Charles Darwin

Natural Selection
- An evolutionary process in which individuals of a species that are best adapted to their environments are the ones most likely to survive; they then pass on these traits to their offspring
James’s Adaptation of Darwin’s Principles

“The most adaptive behaviors in an individual are the ones that grow stronger and become habitual.”

Key Points in the Evolutionary Approach

- The adaptive value of behavior
- The biological mechanisms that make it possible
- The environmental conditions that either encourage or discourage behavior

The Adaptive Value

Evolutionary psychology examines behaviors in terms of their adaptive value for a species over the course of many generations
An Example from the Evolutionary Perspective

- Male vs. Female: differences in visual-spatial ability
- Hunting vs. gathering

Other Examples

- Fear of snakes and spiders
- Greater sexual jealousy in males
- Preference for foods rich in fats and sugars
- Women’s greater emphasis on a potential mate’s economic resources

Other Evolutionary Notions

- Mating preferences, jealousy, aggression, sexual behavior, language, decision making, personality, and development
- Critics
The Biological Approach

- Behavior and mental processes are largely shaped by biological processes
- It is not identified with any single contributor

The Biological Focus

- The brain and central nervous system
- Sensation and perception
- Autonomic nervous system
- Endocrine system
- Heredity and genetics

Biological Focus (cont.)

- The physiological basis of how we learn and remember
- The sleep-wake cycle
- Motivation and emotion
- Understanding the physical bases of mental illnesses such as depression and schizophrenia
Major Contributors

Howard Gardner
- Studied brain damage and neurological disorders
- Created the theory of multiple intelligences
- The different types of intelligence

Hans Eysenck
- Importance of genetics
- Intelligence is inherited
- Personality has a biological component
- Hierarchy of personality traits
Roger Sperry

- Split-brain surgery
- Techniques for measuring the different functions of the hemispheres of the brain
- Application: epilepsy

William James

- Humans are motivated by a variety of biological instincts
- Instincts are inherited tendencies
- The father of American psychology

Masters & Johnson

- Study of human sexuality
- They used physiological recording devices to monitor bodily changes of volunteers engaging in sexual activity
- Insights into sexual problems
Judith Rodin
- Study on obesity
- Genetic predispositions

David McClelland
- Achievement and motivation
- Characteristics of high-achieving people

Stanley Schachter
- Studied eating behavior
- Manipulation of external cues
Elizabeth Loftus
- Study of memory
- Eyewitness testimony
- Myth or repressed memories?

Gustav Fechner
- Psychophysics: the study of the relationship between sensory experiences and the physical stimuli that cause them
- Revolutionized the field of experimental psychology

David Hubel
- Nobel Prize winner (transforming sensory information)
- Implantation of electrodes into the cortex of a cat
Erik Kandel

- Molecular biologist and Nobel Prize winner
- Learning results in the formation of new memories

Hermann Von Helmholtz

- Color vision: color receptors in the retina transmit messages to the brain when visible lights of different wavelengths stimulate them

Paul Ekman

- Emotions and how the human face expresses them
- Human emotions are universal
The Psychodynamic Approach

The Psychodynamic/Psychoanalytic Approach
- Examines unconscious motives influenced by experiences in early childhood and how these motives govern personality and mental disorders
- Free association and psychoanalysis

Sigmund Freud
- The “Father of psychoanalysis”
- The second mind, unconscious
- Repression, free association, dream analysis
- Theory of personality
Carl Jung
- Analytical psychology
- Personal and collective unconscious
- Archetypes

Alfred Adler
- Individual psychology
- Striving for perfection, compensation, and the inferiority complex
- Ordinal position

Anna Freud
- Founder of child psychoanalysis
- Defense mechanisms
Erik Erikson

- A neo-Freudian
- A strong need for social approval
- Psychosocial development and crises

The Humanistic Approach

The “Third Force” in Psychology
- Rejected the views of both behaviorism and psychoanalytic thought
- Free will and conscious choice
The Humanists Revolt

- Humanists felt that both behaviorist and psychoanalytic perspectives were dehumanizing
- Humanists believed that behaviorism and psychoanalysis ignored personal growth
- An optimistic view of human potential

More Differences

- Choices are not dictated by instincts, the biological process, or rewards and punishments
- The world is a friendly, happy, secure place

Carl Rogers

- In the 1940s, humanism began to receive attention because of Rogers
- Human behavior is governed by each individual’s sense of self
- The drive for personal growth
Application of the Humanistic Approach

- Greatest contribution comes in the area of therapy
- Client-centered therapy

Abraham Maslow

- Hierarchy of needs, theory of motivation
- Becoming fully self-actualized
- Emphasis on uniqueness

Albert Ellis

- Creator of rational-emotive therapy
- Self-defeating thoughts cause depression and anxiety
- “I must be loved by all” is an unrealistic notion
Criticisms of the Humanistic Approach

- Not all people have the same needs or meet them in a hierarchical fashion
- The humanistic approach is vague and unscientific

The Cognitive Approach

- Studies people’s mental processes in an effort to understand how humans gain knowledge about the world around them
- Cognito = Latin for “knowledge”
- How we learn, form concepts, solve problems, make decisions, use language
What Is Cognition?

- An “unobservable” mental process
- The study of consciousness, physiological determinants of behavior
- 1950s-1960s: new understanding of children’s cognitive development

Advocates of the Cognitive Approach

- The manipulation of mental images can influence how people behave
- The focus is not on “overt” behavior
- The cognitive method can be studied objectively and scientifically

Wilhelm Wundt

- He used “introspection” as a research technique
- He set up the first psychology laboratory
- Voluntarism
Edward Titchener

- Structuralism
- The mind is structured by breaking down mental experiences into smaller components

Jean Piaget

- Child psychologist
- Educational reforms
- Children are not “blank slates”

Noam Chomsky

- Infants possess an innate capacity for language
- Transformational grammar
Albert Bandura
- Social Cognitive Theory: a form of learning in which the animal or person observes and imitates the behavior of others
- Cognitive learning theory/expectancies

Lawrence Kohlberg
- How children develop a sense of right and wrong
- He borrowed from Piaget
- Moral questions

Albert Ellis
- RET/Changing unrealistic assumptions
- People behave in rational ways
- Role playing
Hans Eysenck

- Trait theory and personality development

Aaron Beck

- A cognitive therapist
- Maladaptive thought patterns cause a distorted view of oneself that leads to problems

Stanley Schachter

- “Misery loves company”
- Anxiety and companionship
Howard Gardner

- Multiple forms of intelligence

The Behavioral Approach

What Is Behaviorism?

- Focuses on observable behavior and the role of learning in behavior
- Behaviorism continues to influence modern psychology
- The role of reward and punishment in learning
Applications of Behaviorism

- Aggression
- Drug abuse
- Self-confidence issues
- Overeating
- Criminality

John Watson

- The father of behaviorism
- Psychology should become a science of behavior
- Environment molds the behavior of us all

Ivan Pavlov

- Nobel Prize winner
- Psychic reflexes
- Classical conditioning
B.F. Skinner

- A strict behaviorist
- Operant conditioning: rewards and punishments

Edward Thorndike

- Studied animal thinking and reasoning abilities
- The puzzle box, instrumental learning
- Laid the groundwork for operant conditioning

The Sociocultural Approach
Why Has Psychology’s Focus Been So Narrow?

- Cross-cultural research is costly, difficult, and time consuming
- Psychology has traditionally focused on the individual, not the group
- Cultural comparisons may foster stereotypes

Sociocultural Issues

- Ethnicity
- Gender issues
- Lifestyles
- Income
- The influence of culture on behavior and the mental process

Stanley Milgram

- Classical experiment on obedience to authority
Solomon Asch

- 1950 conformity study showed that people tend to conform to other people’s ideas of truth even when they disagree with those ideas

Harry Harlow

- Challenged drive-reduction theory
- Surrogate mothers
- Contact comfort

Albert Bandura

- Social learning and modeling
- Learning and aggression
Arthur Jensen

- Cultural differences in IQ
- Is IQ inherited?