

Essay on the five psychological approaches

[Education](#), [Learning](#)



Introduction

Over the years, psychology has become an important science, alongside more traditional sciences such as chemistry and physics. According to the American Psychological Association (2011), psychology is:

“ the study of the mind and behavior. The discipline embraces all aspects of the human experience — from the functions of the brain to the actions of nations, from child development to care for the aged. In every conceivable setting from scientific research centers to mental health care services, " the understanding of behavior" is the enterprise of psychologists” (Support Centre, 2011).

There are various approaches to psychology, namely behavioural, cognitive, humanist, psychoanalytic and biological. The approaches vary widely, and have varied in popularity at different points in history.

Behavioural Approach

Behaviourists see all behaviours as responses to stimuli. They hold the view that what people do is determined by the environment in which they are based. According to behaviourists, the environment provides a stimulus to the person, and therefore such stimuli teach the person who to respond to future stimuli as they progress through their lives (Sammons, 2011a).

Behaviourists are different to all other types of psychologists in that they argue that speculation regarding internal mental processes is unrequired in order to explain behaviour. Instead, they contest, it is sufficient to simply know which stimuli cause which responses.

Behaviourists also contend that humans are born with just a select few

innate reflexes, and that all complex behaviours have to be learned through gradual contact with their environment.

Interestingly, they also argue that humans learn in an identical manner as other animals, as learning processes are the same across all species (Sammons, 2011a).

The fundamental strengths of the behaviourist approach stem from the methods of study it employs. Research carried out by behaviourists is usually reliable, as they are diligent about objectivity, variable controls and accurate measurements. Moreover, it was the behaviourists that introduced the scientific method of study into the science of psychology.

Nevertheless, the downside of these precise methods is that it can cause behaviour to be studied under artificial conditions which differ widely to normal everyday life. Furthermore, behaviourists tend to use animals as their research subjects. This is a point of conflict for many critiques as there are genetic influences on the learning of different animal species, based on their histories within evolution. For example, rats can be conditioned to react to tastes, but they cannot be conditioned to react to smells (Sammons, 2011a).

This type of discrepancy means that cross-species generalisations should be made carefully, a fact which many behaviourists do not consider important.

A larger criticism of behaviourism is that it fails to take into account the influence that mental processes have on learning. According to

behaviourism, people only learn as a direct result of their experiences.

Conversely, however, much research by other types of psychologists supports the notion that people can learn from observing the behaviour of others.

Despite the criticisms, behaviourism has offered practical solutions to many problems regarding humans. Operant conditioning, for example, has been shown as a productive method of revising the behaviour of people who find it difficult to learn in more traditional ways. Furthermore, many individuals with phobias have been significantly helped by behaviour therapies such as systematic desensitization (Sammons, 2011a).

Cognitive Approach

Cognitive psychologists uphold the view that behaviour results from information processing (Sammons, 2011b). By using this term, cognitive psychologists are comparing human minds with computers. This is actually sensible as there are marked similarities between minds and computers. For example, as Alden Sammons (2011b) points out in *The Cognitive Approach: The Basics*, “both have inputs, outputs, memory stores and a limited capacity for how much information they can process at any one time” (Sammons, 2011b).

The behaviour of a computer is decided by how it has been programmed and what information has been fed into it. Likewise, according to cognitive psychologists, the behaviour of a person is decided by the information that has been available to them within their environment, the methods with which they have learned to process the information, and the type of brain the person has and, therefore, their capacity for taking in the information. A strength of the cognitive approach is the use of scientific methods of study, somewhat like the behaviourist approach. However, also similarly to the behaviourists, some other psychologists view the experimental research as too unrealistic and not like normal everyday situations.

The cognitive approach tackles some behaviourist shortfalls by providing an explanation, and giving credit to, the internal processes that influence people's behaviour; this has been achieved largely through the computer metaphor. However, a criticism of the approach is that the dependence and use of the computer metaphor has caused cognitive psychologists to ignore the effect of emotions on human thinking and behaviour. It is also arguable that the information processing concepts that cognitive psychologists use fail to take into account the vast differences between humans in how they behave and think. Furthermore, the cognitive approach seems to neglect scientific facts about brain function and genetic influence on behaviour. Nevertheless, the cognitive approach has contributed positively to the development of treating psychological disorders. Cognitive therapies are some of the most successful methods of treating illnesses such as depression (Sammons, 2011b).

Humanistic Approach

The Humanistic Approach stresses the study of the person as a whole. Humanistic psychologists study the behaviour of humans by looking through the eyes of the observer and by looking through the eyes of the subject as well. Humanistic psychologists view a person's behaviour as being inextricably linked to his internal feelings and his image of self (Humanism, 2011).

Humanistic psychologists assume that phenomenology is key and that humans unequivocally possess free will. The humanistic term for the use of free will is Personal Agency (Humanism, 2011). Humanists also believe that people are fundamentally good, and that they have an inbuilt desire to

improve themselves and the world.

Both Rogers and Maslow viewed personal growth and improvement as a motive that is basic and innate to humans. A useful term in Humanism is self-actualisation, which, according to the Simple Psychology (2011) website, refers to “ psychological growth, fulfilment and satisfaction in life” (Humanism, 2011).

Unlike the behaviourist and cognitive approaches, Humanism discards scientific methodology such as experiments. Instead, humanistic psychologists tend to use qualitative research methods. Examples of such methods are open-ended questionnaires, unstructured observations and unstructured interviews. Qualitative research is especially useful when studying one individual and to gain complex information about how a person thinks or feels.

The Simple Psychology (2011) website states that unlike behaviourists, humanists see humans as profoundly different from other species of the animal kingdom, primarily for the reason that humans are conscious and are “ capable of thought, reason and language” (Humanism, 2011). Humanistic psychologists believe that research involving animals is practically useless in learning about humans. Furthermore, Humanistic psychologists do not use scientific approaches in their research as they consider it inadequate in studying the depth of conscious experience.

Critics of the humanist approach disapprove of the seeming absence of objectivity and precision in their methods. As Alden Sammons (2011c) states in the Approaches to Psychology website, some psychologists view the humanistic methods as “ unscientific, vague and open to bias and their

attempt to ‘ get inside’ other people’s way of perceiving the world as misguided and quite possibly pointless” (Sammons, 2011c).

Other critics disagree with the positive light with which humanists view human nature. The humanist approach claims that people are inherently good, but they do not explain the evil that appears to exist in the world, and the unacceptable things that people do to each other.

Psychoanalytic Approach

Sigmund Freud was the creator of psychoanalysis and the psychodynamic psychological approach. This perspective stressed the impact of the unconscious mind on a person’s behaviour. Freud claimed that the human mind was made up of three basic elements; these were the Id, the Ego and the Superego (Psychoanalytic, 2011).

According to About Psychology (2011), The ID referred to the part of a personality which is comprised of “ unconscious psychic energy that works to satisfy basic urges, needs and desires” (Psychoanalytic, 2011). Freud described the Ego as the part of the personality that controls and maintains a balance between the Id and the Superego. The Superego is the part that is made up of a person’s internalized ideals that have been learned from other people and from the environment.

A large number of Freud's observations and theories stemmed from clinical cases and case studies (Psychoanalytic, 2011). While these methods provided him with a depth of information, they also meant that generalising any findings to a larger number of people was problematic. Some critics believe that Freud’s theory, due to its nature, was impossible to prove wrong and was therefore considered unscientific. Furthermore, some psychologists

argued that Freud's methods were unscientific because his theory was based on studying atypical participants, by using case study methods he was not allowing his results to be objective and therefore, could be biased.

Nevertheless, Freud's theories dramatically altered how we perceive the human mind and behaviour, and the scientist was responsible for changing psychology and culture forever. Specifically, psychoanalysis has had a huge influence on a vast array of topics.

Biological Approach

Biological approach psychologists believe that human behaviour and experiences are direct results of nervous system activity. Therefore, Sammons (2011d) says that according to this approach, the things that a person feels, says and does are all caused by " electrochemical events occurring within and between the neurones that make up their nervous system, particular those in the brain" (Sammons, 2011d). A large number of biopsychologists agree that as a person's genes determines the development of their brain, that person's behaviour may have genetic influences. Also, due to an individual's genes having been inherited as a result of evolution, many biopsychologists consider that evolution may contain answers and explanations for certain characteristics, both behavioural and psychological (Sammons, 2011d).

There are various ways in which to study the involvement of biological processes in behaviour but, as Sammons (2011d) states in Approaches to Psychology, researchers tend to prefer methods which are " quantitative, objective and well controlled because these are most likely to produce valid scientific evidence" (Sammons, 2011d).

Many different types of brain scanning technology can be useful in studying the structure and functions of a person's brain. Examples of such technology are PET and MRI. Additionally, the nervous system can be looked at by surgically manipulating a person's brain. Such research may be carried out on animals, as biopsychologists consider the human nervous system as similar to other mammals.

The biological approach uses methods which are reliable, valid and scientific. Sammons (2011d) asserts that this credibility is further boosted by the approach's emphasis on "objectively observable phenomena rather than subjective experiences" (Sammons, 2011d). Most psychologists perceive this as a strength, but some suggest that biopsychologists fail to take into account a person's experiences, and how this affects their thoughts and behaviour.

Another criticism of the biological approach is its tendency to use animals as study participants in order to draw conclusions about human behaviour. As each animal species' nervous system reflects its evolutionary history, it can be dangerous to generalise across species.

A significant objection to the biological approach is that it concentrates on genetic and biological impacts on human behaviour, while seeming to ignore social and cultural influences.

Despite the criticisms, the biological approach has positively contributed to

our perception of behavioural processes. Furthermore, it has contributed to many other fields such as surgery and medicine. Biological psychologists have offered credible explanations for various psychological disorders such

as depression and schizophrenia, and many drug therapies for such illnesses have changed many people's lives for the better.

Conclusion

Although very different from one another, all five approaches have offered important insights and developments to both the science of psychology and to society. When studying the approaches it is important to keep perspective of the wider context surrounding them.

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