

The core assumptions of the biological and psychoanalytic



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The psychoanalytic perspective grew out of subsequent psychoanalytic theories (1901, 1924, and 1940) following decades of interactions with clients with the use of an innovative procedure developed by Sigmund Freud that required lengthy verbal interactions with patients during which Freud probed deep into their lives. In a nutshell, the psychoanalytic perspective looked to explain personality, motivation, and psychological disorders by focussing on the influence of early childhood experiences, on unconscious motives and conflicts, and on the methods people use to cope with their sexual and aggressive urges. The Biological perspective on the other hand looks at the physiological bases of behaviour in humans and animals. It suggests that an organism's functioning can be explained in terms of the bodily structures and biochemical processes that underlie behaviour. The study of physiology and biological process has played a major role in psychology since its earliest beginnings. This paper attempts to examine the similarities and differences between the psychoanalytic perspective and the biological perspective with the key focus on the core assumptions and features of these perspectives as well as their individual strengths.

The Biological perspective has two core assumptions; the first is that all behaviour including abnormal behaviour has physical causes in the same way that physical illnesses have physical causes. Many abnormal counts of behaviour can be traced back to two important physiological systems in the body: The Nervous System (including the brain), and the Endocrine System (hormones and adrenaline). Abnormal behaviour may be caused by a chemical malfunction in the brain which in turn could be the result of a genetic disorder. For instance, excess dopamine (a neurotransmitter) in the

brain is linked with the mental illness Schizophrenia, and it is also clear that the eating disorder anorexia nervosa has a genetic component.

The second is that mental illness can be treated by physical intervention.

The assumption here is that there is a physiological cause, so a physiological treatment is used. After all, the brain, although complex, is still a physical object and part of the physiological system of the body (nervous system).

Other assumptions are that human genes have evolved over millions of years to adapt behaviour to the environment. Therefore, most behaviour will have an adaptive / evolutionary purpose.

The psychoanalytic perspective understands us from the point of view of our unconscious and early childhood experiences. The contents of our unconscious can give us a neurosis, which is an anxiety state that affects the quality of your life. Freud's psychodynamic structure of personality suggests that our behaviour is influenced by id, ego and superego. We are born id, and acquire ego and superego by puberty. Freud also has a psychosexual theory of adult personality development, where he says our personality develops in stages during childhood. If we fail to resolve conflicts associated with a particular (oral, anal, phallic, latent and genital) stage of personality development we could develop fixations. These can show themselves in our personality-related behaviours e. g. an adult thumb sucker would be said to have an oral fixation. We unconsciously use ego-defence mechanisms to protect ourselves from the anxieties of life. An application of the approach is found in psychoanalytic psychotherapy. Features of psychoanalytic psychotherapy include free association, dream analysis, resistance, regression using hypnosis and transference.

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Both these approaches have provided us with an accessible framework for everyday understanding of the major influences on our behaviour. When something as complex as human behaviour is explained by the Biological and Psychoanalytic approaches, they each simplify human behaviour in terms of their own approach. When looking at the factors that are thought to control human behaviour, both the Biological and Psychoanalytic approaches make assumptions about this, but they differ in the detail. The Biological perspective is certainly on the nature side of the debate as many of the biological functions that are thought to influence our behaviour are set at the point of birth by the action of genes. Changes in our biology as we grow will have a corresponding effect on our behaviour. The Psychoanalytic perspective, on the other hand is on the nurture side of the debate. The only thing a child is born with, according to Freud, is an ID which has a very healthy libido which requires satisfaction immediately. Further parts of the personality develop as the child interacts with the environment (including parents) until all the parts have developed and are functioning in a healthy way, which takes time to develop.

Both these perspectives differ in many ways, for instance the Biological perspective assumes that it is our Biology, the action of nerves, hormones and genes that produces our behaviour. The Psychoanalytic approach assumes that it is our unconscious mind, the part of our mind that we do not have access to, that controls our behaviour. Methodology in both perspectives differs because the Biological perspective tends to use experiments to investigate the effect of our biology on our behaviour. These experiments are usually highly controlled, and collate a large amount of

quantitative data which adds to the scientific nature of enquiry. In contrast the Psychoanalytic approach relies heavily on the use of case studies. As a result the data collected is subjective, i. e. the interpretation is dependent on the individual's viewpoint, as compared to the objectivity of the biological approach. Although rooted in an intellectual and rigorous framework developed by Freud, the Psychoanalytic approach is not accepted as an objective and scientific study of human behaviour. As a result of the differing analyses of the root of human behaviour the two perspectives also differ significantly where therapy is concerned. The Biological approach uses our biology as a basis for the therapy associated with it for example psychosurgery, whereas the Psychoanalytic approach uses dream analysis which tries to uncover what is contained in our unconscious

The psychoanalytic perspective is unique among other perspectives, for recognizing the complexity of human motives and irrationality of much human behaviour and recognizing the importance of the unconscious mind as well as the importance of early experience and relationships. The Psychoanalytic perspective aided to the development of a set of therapeutic techniques which have been of great benefit to those in psychological distress. It's contribution to research and methodology in terms of making the case study method popular in psychology has been prominent. Another of strengths is how the perspective highlights the importance of childhood. It is however criticized due to the difficulty in studying some of its premises scientifically. For instance, the case study method is non-scientific. Further, it is hugely difficult to scientifically or otherwise find support for its hypothetical constructs like id, ego superego etc. Also, Freud used a small

sample of neurotic middle class Viennese women, and generalised his findings out to all of us. The psychoanalytic perspective rejects the idea that people have free will. A person's behaviour is determined by their unconscious motives which are shaped by their biological drives and their early experiences; this is a weakness of the perspective as the approach it follows here is too deterministic.

With the biological perspective a better understanding of how the brain works has been achieved. Such as with Broca's work, "localization of the brain" psychologists were able to connect a specific behaviour to a specific area of the brain. The biological perspective has also helped us understand the effect that drugs have in the organism (such as cocaine, alcohol etc.) and understand what happens to different areas of the brain and to neurotransmitters. The approach has many empirical studies to support its theories, modified according to the results of their findings so as to remove any flaws so other researchers do not receive incorrect information about any experiments. Nonetheless, it's clear that the biological approach finds itself firmly on the genetic, or nativist side of the 'nature-nurture' debate. Its understanding of us as neurons, structures and functions in the brain, hormones etc. has seen it accused of being reductionist and deterministic. This is because the perspective reduces our feelings and reactions to robot-like behaviour and ignores the factors in our everyday environment; our childhood experiences and the influence of friends and media that have been found to affect us. Another criticism of the biological perspective is low ecological validity in regards to the use of laboratory experiments in most of its research. Laboratory experiments do

not reflect a real life situation. This is a problem for psychology in that it is a subject interested in our real-life everyday behaviours. Laboratory experiments by their very nature often get human participants behaving in an abnormal manner. This leads to distorted data, and thus weak psychological conclusions.

As we have seen, there are many similarities and differences between biological and psychoanalytic perspectives when it comes to explaining behaviour and giving different angles. No one approach has explanatory powers over the other. Furthermore, the psychoanalytic perspective concentrates too much on the unconscious mind and childhood. As such it tends to lose sight of the role of socialisation (which is different in each country) and the possibility of free will. The biological approach reduces humans to a set of mechanisms and physical structures that are clearly essential and important (e. g. genes). However, it fails to account for consciousness and the influence of the environment on behaviour. It could be said that, even if you reject Freud's theories, his contribution to psychology is unarguable. Many of Freud's insights - the importance of childhood, or the idea that we are influenced by unconscious processes remain very influential even after most of his theoretical concepts have been rejected by the mainstream. The same could be said for the biological perspective in that its contribution to psychology has been very influential, for example it has provided us with another argument to the nature-nurture debate.