

# Differences of the psychodynamic and behavioural approaches



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While psychodynamic and behavioural approaches are the two major approaches to personality, they view personality from different perspective. Psychodynamic approach argues personality is caused by forces in the unconscious but not learnt. Individuals have little control over their behaviour as it is predetermined, and early childhood plays a crucial part in shaping one's personality. Behavioural approach, on the other hand, recognizes personality as learnt and focuses only on present behaviour matters. Given the differences, it has been argued whether, in terms of scientific merit, psychodynamic or behavioural approach is more comprehensive. The strengths of psychodynamic approach are consideration of childhood experiences and recognition of the unconscious part. On the contrary, behavioural approach focuses on behaviour that can be scientifically measured and verified, and recognizes the importance of external environment on personality. From the above arguments, it is finally concluded, in term of methodology and testability, behavioural approach is more comprehensive.

## **Introduction**

The scientific merit of psychodynamic and behavioural approaches to personality is quite different in terms of supporting whether personality is largely inborn or learnt. The term “ scientific merit” here is defined as the methodology employed and testability of the approaches. On one hand, it has been argued psychodynamic approach relies too heavily on unconscious mind whose existence is hard to prove; on the other hand, behavioural approach has also been criticized for being overly environmentally determinist while overlooking mental processes. The following essay is to

critically compare and contrast these two approaches from various aspects, and deduce which one is more encompassing.

The psychodynamic approach argues experiences in childhood have significant influence on the development of adult personality without their consciousness. Freud (1969), the founder of psychodynamic approach to psychology, suggested the psyche consists of the following three parts: the preconscious, the conscious, and the unconscious. Among these three, individuals are only not aware of the unconscious part, in which there is always conflict between the “ id” and the “ superego”. The “ id” is unconscious basic drives present in the newborn, and the “ superego” represents the conscience developed by living in a community. These two parts of the psyche has to be managed by the “ ego”, which mediates between the impulses of the “ id” and social constraints. Freud argued that every child must undergo the psycho-sexual stages and their experiences play a large part in adult development, particularly the development of personality. (Freud, 1969).

According to behavioral approach, personality is viewed as a pattern of learned behaviors developed through either classical or operant conditioning, and then further molded by reinforcement such as punishment or rewards. Classical conditioning, first proposed by Pavlov (1936), is “ learning through association”, which suggested individual learns to connect a neutral stimulus with a reflex response such as anger or delight. Also, operant conditioning, primarily proposed by B. F. Skinner (1974), is “ learning through the outcomes of behaviour”. If one’s behaviour is rewarded,

then it will be maintained or increased; if it is penalized, it will be weakened and even extinguished.

There are several substantial differences between psychodynamic and behavioural approaches. Comparatively, psychodynamic approach recognizes that experiences in childhood have influence throughout our lives without our consciousness. It provides important framework for judging one's personality and behaviour. For example, the reason for a person committing murder may be the fact that his violent father has always physically-punished him since childhood. Nevertheless, behavioural approach argued most human behaviour is mechanical, and one's personality is simply the product of stimuli and responses. Therefore, the psychodynamic approach acknowledges everyone can suffer mental illnesses and conflicts without their faults.

Compared with the psychodynamic approach, another weakness of the behavioural approach is that it ignores the part of unconscious. According to Social Learning Theory, Bandura (1989) has suggested cognitive factors cannot be overlooked if learning is needed to be understood. Bandura has also noted that while reward and punishment substantially shape one's personality, cognition has as much impact as they do. Also, the principles of behavioural approach have mainly been tested on animals. It implies some findings may not be applicable to human being, who is much more complex.

On the other hand, one of the strengths of behavioural approach over psychodynamic approach, in term of testability, is that it only focuses on behaviour that can be tested and observed, which makes it very useful in

experiments under laboratory setting where behaviour can be observed and verified. Therefore, the results derived from behavioural approach have been, and continue to be, objectively and reliably measured.

In terms of methodology, the behavioural approach focuses on the present instead of examining one's past or their medical history. In some cases, this can be a kind of strength, especially for those suffering from their abnormal behaviour. For them, instead of knowing the causes, getting rid of the unpleasant behaviour is much more important. For example, a person with an irrational impulse to brush his teeth unnecessarily many times a day is more concerned about ridding himself of this unnatural behaviour.

Compared with behavioural approach, the major criticism of psychodynamic approach is that it cannot be scientifically verified or observed. In fact, no one is even able to design an experience which can effectively refute psychodynamic theory. There is no way to prove whether the unconscious really exists, and whether a repressed memory is real or not. Therefore, psychodynamic approach does not have solid scientific evidence underpinning the arguments about personality.

Another weakness would be the fact that most of the evidence for psychodynamic theories was taken from Freud's case studies, such as Little Hans. (Freud, 1969). The main problem is that the case studies are based on studying one person in detail, and they tend to be highly subjective. This makes generalisations to the wider population difficult and not representative enough.

## **Conclusion**

In term of methodology and testability, behavioural approach is more encompassing for the following reason. Firstly, unlike psychodynamic approach which can hardly be scientifically observed or tested, behavioural approach has proved to be useful in scientific experiments under laboratory setting where results can be reliably verified. Secondly, behavioural approach, in terms of methodology, recognizes the influence of the external environment on one's personality. Finally, most of the evidence for psychodynamic theories was taken from Freud's case studies, which is very subjective and it is hard to generalize results to a larger population.