

# Similarities and differences in the approaches to psychology



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Psychology is the scientific study of the mind and behaviour, which include study of humans and animals. Its origins can be traced to debates by Aristotle and Plato. However, in those days it was a part of philosophy and not a separate discipline, psychology came about as its own discipline during the mid-1800s, thanks to a German physiologist named Wilhelm Wundt. There are various methods used which have been tried and tested over the years as psychology has grown. This essay will introduce to the various theoretical concepts relating to behaviourist, psychodynamic, humanist and cognitive approaches to psychology particularly identifying similarities and differences in their methodologies.

### Psychodynamic

The first approach we will scrutinize is the psychodynamic perspective; Sigmund Freud (1856 -1939) first explored this approach, and has since been developed further by other psychologists. The term refers to a wide number of theories that emphasise the effect of the unconscious mind, personality, interpersonal relationships and the influence of childhood experiences have later on in life to explain human behaviour. Freud suggests that causes of behaviour originate from the unconscious. According to psychodynamic approach, Freud believed that the personality is made up of three parts, these are;

“ The id- Is first to develop, it operates by the pleasure principle (e. g. water, food, warmth) and avoids unpleasurable (e. g. hunger and cold), dark inaccessible side of personality.

Ego- Operates by the reality principle, it allows us to be realistic and does not allow the ID to get its own way.

Super ego- Is the conscience and stops us from doing wrong, whereas the Ego and id are selfish, the superego considers others too" (Benson N, 1999).

Psychodynamic has various forms of methodology; Freud got his results from talking sessions known as " free association" with patients which he wrote as case studies such as The Rat Man. Furthermore, psychodynamic uses dream analysis which Freud referred to as the " royal road to the unconscious", Freud's theory is that during dreams the ego's defences are lowered thus allows the repressed thoughts/memories to appear in distorted forms. In addition, another form of methodology occasionally used within psychodynamic are Freudian slips. Also, many psychologists use hypnosis within the psychodynamic approach, although Freud did not believe in the use of it.

Unfortunately, there are flaws in these methods such as case studies are very subjective and the results cannot be generalised. Above all, the main criticism of this approach is that it is unscientific in its methods; the lack of empirical support questions its strength, for example it is not possible to scientifically analyse a dream. Furthermore, Freud's subjects were far too biased as they all were middle aged Jewish women from Vienna that suffered similar issues. The demographics of his studies are far too narrow and small; the amount of middle aged Jewish European women is roughly 0.1% of the world's population. Moreover, it is difficult to disprove psychodynamic methodologies as we cannot tell whether or not it works

because once again it lacks scientific evidence to support its claims. For instance, you cannot prove that God does or does not exist as there is no scientific way to prove this. At the same time Freud was developing psychoanalysis, a new perspective was being introduced, called behaviourism.

### Behaviourist

Behaviourism was the second approach to emerge following psychodynamic, the behavioural perspective focuses purely on learned behaviour.

Behaviourists “ wanted psychology to adopt an objective approach based on observable behaviour. They criticised introspection because it was subjective and not observable and hence could not be scientific” (Pennington D, 2002).

Furthermore, they believe each person is born to a blank slate and is nurtured to become who they are by denying the existence of inheritable characteristics. In addition, because there is virtually no dissimilarity between animals and humans in the learning, thus allows experiments to be carried out on animal.

Behaviourism was founded by an American psychologist John B Watson (1878-1958) in 1913. However this perspective has created many famous behaviourists, these include Ivan Pavlov a Russian Physiologist (1849-1936), B. F Skinner an American psychologist (1904-1990), and E. Thorndike an American psychologist (1904-1990).

Watsons famous experiment was that of Little Albert, where he used noises to strike fear into little Albert whenever he touched the rat that had been

placed near him. Eventually, the baby learned not to touch the rat as it is associated with loud scary noises.

Skinner continued from Watson, mainly studying non reflexive behaviour, “ he thought neither mental processes nor neural mechanisms ought to be adverted in psychological explanations” (Pennington D, 2002).

Thorndike’s most famous work was the “ law of effect” which he thought was the principle of learning, he suggested that behaviours that are rewarded tends to be repeated and behaviours which have not been rewarded tends to die out. The law relates to Skinner’s operant conditioning which also has a similar rule.

Behaviourism became widely recognised after the success of Pavlov’s conditioning a dog to salivate whenever a sound was made, which became known as “ classical conditioning”. Also, Skinner continued from Watson, mainly studying non reflexive behaviour, “ he thought neither mental processes nor neural mechanisms ought to be adverted in psychological explanations” (Pennington D, 2002). Skinner’s experiment was equally as successful as Pavlov, Skinner sought to condition a rat by placing one in a box and sooner or later it will press the lever, each time the lever is pressed a food pellet is giving, he later called his positive reinforcement. This form of conditioning is known as “ operant conditioning”. The difference between the two forms of learning is that classical relies on knowledge the animal/human already has, whereas operant implants it into the subject. Unfortunately, there are many ethical considerations to be taken into account in regards to behaviourists experiments as they can be damaging to the subject.

The Behaviourism approach differs from psychodynamic greatly, because behaviourism is founded on observation, physical stimuli and responses that are somewhat measurable by using many experiments to support its theories. Furthermore, behaviourists use science to analyze everything and regard seeing as believing. Compared to psychodynamic that is based on assumptions, it is more of a leap of faith than a science as there is no hard evidence to support its theories. In addition, psychodynamic approach criticises behaviourists as it does not accept that the unconscious mind influences behaviour.

However, there are similarities between psychodynamic and behaviourism, such both are deterministic compared to free-will such as behaviourists believe that behaviour is based on previous experiences in forms of reinforcement and punishment in comparison to psychodynamics who believe behaviour is related to dreams and other stuff associated inside the unconscious. In addition, both perspectives are based on the study of human behaviour. Following psychoanalysis and behaviourism, humanistic perspective emerged as the third force in psychology.

### Humanist

Humanism was the third in the series of psychology perspectives to emerge, the humanist approach focuses on the individual especially with personal choice, creativity and most importantly free will. In addition, it places strong emphasis on conscious experiences and human nature in effecting behaviour and thoughts. Furthermore, humanist psychologists attempt to not only see

the world from the outside but also through the eyes of the observer being studied.

Humanistic perspective was founded by Abraham Maslow (1908-1970) an American professor of psychology in the 1950s. Maslow's key theory was that of self-actualisation: "The innate human motivation. That each of us has to achieve our potential by using and developing our talents and abilities. Each time we experience such a sense of fulfilment is called a peak experience. In order to reach self-actualisation, we have to satisfy lower needs that exist at different levels." The diagram below is of the hierarchy of needs that Maslow discusses.

The humanistic approach uses various methodologies, such as informal interviews, questionnaires and case studies. In addition, it prefers qualitative methods rather than quantitative as it gives more insight and information into behaviour.

However, there are weaknesses to its methodology, such as case studies which are also used in psychodynamic are very subjective, such as how can anyone possibly tell if someone is "self actualised". Humanism has to rely on the subjects own assessment which can be influenced by his/her own emotion at the time. In addition, both psychodynamic and humanism are unscientific in their approach as we cannot measure dreams nor self actualization. Furthermore, both psychodynamic and humanism are ideographic, because they "psychology should focus on the subjective experiences, feelings and thoughts of a person" (Pennington D, 2002), in comparison to behaviourism which is nomothetic. Though, all three

perspectives do emphasize on nurture over nature, but psychodynamic does take nature into account, whereby the other two perspectives do not.

Although, psychodynamic and behaviourism contradicts the humanist approach as humanism believes in free-will, whereas psychodynamic and behaviourism are deterministic. Also, humanism rejects behaviourism as it uses qualitative methods and cannot compare animals to humans because they analyze everything on an individual basis on thus cannot make an assessment on anything they have not studied. In addition, humanist takes the environment into account compared to psychodynamic which does not.

### Cognitive

“ The cognitive approach in psychology, which is to do with the study of thought, dates back over 100years to the work of Ebbinghaus (1885)”  
(Pennington D, 2002).

Behaviourism and cognitivism were aimed at discovering universal features of human cognition, emotion and perception

The Cognitive approach does not recognise environmental (re: behaviorism) factors in determining behaviour.