

PSYCHOLOGY 1: APPROACHES TO PSYCHOLOGY & ETHICS

There are three main approaches to psychology: psychoanalytic, behaviourist, and humanistic. The psychoanalytic approach was started and developed mainly in Europe between 1900 and 1939 by Sigmund Freud, a Viennese doctor who specialized in neurology. As a doctor, he became interested in the field of hysteria - the manifestation of physical symptoms without physical causes – and became convinced that unconscious mental causes were responsible, and could be responsible for all mental disorders and even our personality. He created the theory of personality, and based his ideas upon intensive case studies of a considerable range of patients, especially his infamous study on “Little Hans”, a young boy who Freud carried out psychoanalysis upon. Bowlby (1946) applied Freud’s theories when he used psychoanalysis on a large group of children with various ages on a study of habitual delinquency.

The central emphasis is on dynamic, biological processes especially those taking place in the unconscious mind, and involves the idea of psychic determinism, i.e. Freudian slips. Freud said that we all have instinctual drives - wishes, desires, needs, or demands, which are hidden and suppressed from the consciousness because society disapproves of their open expression. Freud proposes three main components of the mind; the id, the ego and the superego.

The id operates on the pleasure principle and its goal is immediate gratification and reduction of tension caused by irrational impulses. The ego operates on the reality principle, and controls the id in its reaction with the world. The superego operates on the idealisation principle, with norms and values of society being internalised.

According to this approach, we all undergo psychosexual stages - oral, anal, phallic, latency and genital - which gradually motivate the individual to focus on the libido, and can be linked with the Oedipus complex. The libido is described as ‘psychic energy’ behind primary drives of hunger, aggression, sex and irrational impulses. Fixation at any of these stages can lead to behaviour in our adulthood reflecting earlier stages of our childhood, which are caused by unresolved conflicts. For example, fixation at the oral stage can cause adult behaviour that is centred on the mouth (eating, smoking, etc).

The purpose of psychoanalysis was as a therapy to treat mental disorder by means of treating the unconscious mind. The methods that Freud used for investigating the unconsciousness were by means of case studies, and deep analysis and interpretation. Free association involves the uninhibited expression of thought association, no matter how bizarre or embarrassing, from the client to the analyst. Dream analysis involves the analyst attempting to decode the symbols and unravel the hidden meaning (the latent content) of a dream from the dreamer’s report (the manifest content). Freud used his theory to explain a number of topics. He explained that the development of personality came from fixations or defence mechanisms, and that aggression was caused by hydraulic drives and displacement. Abnormality was seen as the consequence of early traumas and repression, which subsequently could impair our moral and gender development, the latter being the result of the Oedipus complex.

The psychoanalytic approach has been greatly influential within psychology, in areas such as psychotherapy and developmental theories, and also beyond in art, literature and other sciences, some 100 years since Freud first developed his ideas. His theory has had some experimental support in certain areas, such as repression and fixation. Freud introduced the world to the concept of the unconscious, and regarded his case studies like ‘Little Hans’ and ‘Anna O’ as firm empirical support for his theory. He thought his belief in determinism and detailed collection of data were scientific, yet many psychologists today argue that his theories and ideas are too biological, that is that they rely too much on the influence of basic instincts and physical drives. Most of Freud’s ideas and concepts came from only a handful of results on the study of children. Freud could have allowed his own prejudices to shape his analysis, leading to no objective measures. His close interventions and feedback to the child’s family could have changed the child’s behaviour and that of its family.

Psychoanalysis lacks rigorous empirical support, especially regarding normal development, and leads to reductionism, i.e. it reduces human activity to a basic set of structures, which can’t account for behaviour. Freud’s ideas have been accused of being irrefutable, and are therefore theoretically unscientific.

Another approach to psychology is the behaviourist approach, which concentrates on the theory of learning and behavioural therapy, and tries to explain behaviour in terms of its relation to environmental events (stimuli), rather than any innate factors. The view that behaviour should be the sole subject matter of psychology was first advanced by the American psychologist John B. Watson in the early 1900s. His position came to be called behaviourism. He believed that psychologists could not afford to “speculate” upon the unobservable inner workings of the mind, since they are too private to be studied scientifically. For the behaviourist, much of their research focuses on objectively observable behaviour, rather than any internal process. The approach proposes that behaviour is radical, and that it is caused and maintained in this way.

Drawing on from the work of Pavlov (1927), Watson and other behaviourists such as Thorndike and Skinner proceeded to develop theories of learning such as classical and operant conditioning that they attempted to use to explain virtually all behaviour. In 1920, Watson used a young boy (Little Albert) in a study of conditioned emotional reactions and responses. Thorndike said that learning could take place by trial and error, and not just by association as in classical conditioning. He carried out an experiment using a cat to test his hypothesis. At first, the cat would open up its box as a fluke through trial and error, but after a while, the cat did eventually learn how to open up the box in which it was placed almost immediately, to claim its reward of a fish. He called this the Law of Effect. Behaviourists adopt a very homothetic approach, using strict laboratory experimentation usually conducted on small animals. Animals were used for testing because behaviourists believed the laws of learning were universal, that there was only a quantitative difference between animals and humans, and also animals are practically and ethically more convenient to test. The behaviourist approach can be applied to many practical uses such as guide dogs and advertising, as well as programmed learning in education and to those suffering behavioural disturbances, perhaps through use of systematic desensitisation, token economies, behaviour reinforcements and behaviour shaping. Discoveries made from the work of behaviourists can explain many aspects of behaviour, such as language acquisition, moral development, attraction, and abnormality. It can also be used to explain other areas such as aggression, prejudice, gender role identity etc.

The empirical perspective of this approach lends itself to scientific research, and its experimental methodology has left a lasting impression on the subject of psychology. It provides strong counter arguments to the nature side of the nature/nurture debate, and is a very parsimonious approach, explaining a great variety of phenomena using only a few simple principles.

However, the approach has been labelled as a mechanistic and deterministic perspective. Bandura (1977) expressed this point very neatly: "If action were determined solely by external rewards and punishments, people would behave like weather vanes, constantly shifting in radically different directions to conform to the whims of others".

The behaviourist approach ignores consciousness and objective experiences, and describes behaviour as being determined by the environment and not freewill. The vast majority of work carried out by behaviourists is on animals, which, as well as having some disapproval from society, has a biologically qualitative difference between humans, and demonstrates artificial, and not natural, learning.

A third approach to psychology is the humanistic approach. This began in response to concerns by therapists against perceived limitations of psychodynamic theories, especially psychoanalysis. Individuals like Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow felt existing (psychodynamic) theories failed to adequately address issues like the meaning of behaviour, and the nature of healthy growth. However, the result was not simply new variations on psychodynamic theory, but rather a fundamentally new approach.

Like Carl Rogers, Maslow is widely regarded as one of the founders of the humanistic approach. While less influential among therapists than Rogers, Maslow may actually be better known to the public, because of his interest in applying psychological principles to areas like behaviour in business settings. In this regard, his hierarchy of needs has been a basic concept in human resources and organisational behaviour for several decades.

There are several factors that distinguish the humanistic approach from other approaches within psychology, including the emphasis on subjective experience and individual uniqueness, a rejection of deterministic and mechanistic approaches, and a concern for positive growth rather than pathology. Humanists use concepts such as self esteem, unconditional positive regard, and personal constructs, to illustrate their ideas.

While one might argue that some psychodynamic theories provide a vision of healthy growth (including Jung's concept of individuation), the other characteristics distinguish the humanistic approach from every other approach within psychology (and sometimes lead theorists from other approaches to say the humanistic approach is not a science at all). Most psychologists believe that behaviour can only be understood objectively (by an impartial observer), but the humanists argue that this results in concluding that an individual is incapable of understanding their own behaviour, a view which they see as both paradoxical and dangerous to well-being.

Instead, humanists like Rogers argue that the meaning of behaviour is essentially personal and subjective. They further argue that accepting this idea is not unscientific, because ultimately all individuals are subjective: what makes science reliable is not that scientists are purely objective, but that different observers can agree upon the nature of observed events (a process Rogers calls intersubjective verification). Humanists take a phenomenological approach, investigating the individual's conscious experience of the world. For this reason, they employ the idiographic case study method, using a variety of individualistic techniques, such as flexible open-ended interviews and the Q-sort technique. Kelly (1955) created the personal construct theory, which enables psychologists to view reality through the eyes of their subject. Later, in 1959, Rogers proposed the 'self' theory and founded non-directive therapy (counselling).

Bugental (1967), the first president of the American Association for Humanistic Psychology, described that a proper understanding of human nature can only be gained from studying humans, and not other animals. The assumptions for this approach say that psychology should research areas that are meaningful and important to human existence, not neglect them because they are too difficult. Psychology should be applied to enrich human life, and should study internal experiences as well as external behaviour, and consider that individuals can show some degree of free will. In general, humanists assume that the whole person should be studied in their environmental context. The primary application of the humanistic approach has been through therapeutic treatment for anybody suffering 'problems with living'. Other humanistic therapies include client centred therapy and gestalt therapy, which was developed by Fritz Perls. These applications can be used to explain areas such as personality/self identity, motivation, and abnormality.

The humanistic approach has contributed greatly to psychology by re-emphasising the need to study consciousness and human experience for a complete study of the subject. It emphasizes on the importance of self-actualisation, responsibility, freedom of choice, and social context in therapy, serving as a valuable agent of criticism against the extremes of earlier major approaches. It also highlights the value of more individualistic and idiographic methods of study, particularly in the areas of personality and abnormality. Humanistic psychology has not, however, had the significant impact on mainstream academic psychology that the other approaches have. This is probably because humanists deliberately take a less scientific approach to studying humans, since their belief in free will is in opposition to the deterministic laws of science, due to their idiographic approach, rather than producing generalised laws that apply to everyone. The issues they investigate, such as consciousness and emotion, are amongst the most difficult to objectively study.

When psychologists carry out any research with humans or animals, they must justify their need for experimentation and refer to appropriate ethical guidelines. Research with animals can be used to benefit the animals themselves, e.g. to provide better zoo conditions or for the breeding of endangered species. It can also be used for protecting people and crops. For example, the medfly can be attracted away from devastating orchards by use of a pheromone usually used between medfly to attract mates.

When it is not possible to study humans, animals can indicate possibilities and discover innate aspects of human behaviour. The transfer of findings from animal species to humans is plausible if we accept the principle of evolutionary continuity – differences between species are thought to be differences of quantity, not quality. Behavioural continuity is an idea borrowed from the theory of evolution from Charles Darwin (1809-1882), and psychologists have extended Darwin's idea of evolutionary continuity to include behaviour. They argue that by looking at species which are related to humans but less highly evolved, we can see human behaviour patterns in a simpler form.

Much of the rigorously controlled experiments carried out on animals would not be permitted on humans due to ethical or legal reasons. These include interbreeding studies, deprivation, and brain and tissue research. Hubel and Wiesel (1962) used a cat to study how individual cells of the visual cortex responded to the input from the retina. Psychologists can also study the relative effects of heredity and environment on behaviour by selectively breeding animals and then rearing them in different environments.

Arguably, scientists and psychologists are more able to remain detached and impartial when studying animals because it is easier to treat animals as 'objects' than it is humans. When studying humans, psychologists enter into a relationship with them which may bias and distort the interpretation of their findings. But objectively this may be easier to achieve with some species such as others, e.g. puppies over snakes.

Humans mature and reproduce much slower than animals. So animals make it easier to assess the effects of early experiences on behaviour, to compare generations, or to draw conclusions from selective breeding experiments. Lorenz (1953) used greylag goslings and other young birds to discover the main factor in determining the figure that a young animal imprints on.

Animal research can be used to discover cause and effect relationships (such as social deprivation) where evidence from human studies is only circumstantial. This, in turn, can suggest clearer hypotheses for testing on humans. The experiment of Harlow's monkeys (1959) was carried out to test theories of developmental psychology and attachment theories.

The problems with using animals in experiments involve the fact that animals can't report what they are thinking or experiencing, such as pain or emotions, which makes assessment difficult and can cause problems regarding ethics. The problem of extrapolation is also an issue,

that simply because the structures of animals are the same as humans, it doesn't mean that they perform the same functions as humans.

Some psychologists object to the use of animals on the grounds of anthromorphism. Indeed, humanists argue that humans are qualitatively different from animals, and that certain features of humans e.g. consciousness and language, means it might never be appropriate to generalise from animals. The effects of learning cancel out inherited behaviour so that the same rules do not apply to animals and humans. Koestler (1970) commented that to extrapolate from rats to humans was to commit the sin of ratomorphism.

Some animal studies use the experimental method, and objections to this centre on the rigorous controls which may be used. This is particularly true of lab experiments which may lack ecological validity. Although there are other methods of studying animal behaviour, the less control the researcher has over events the less confidence we can have in the conclusions. Selectively bred laboratory animals make very convenient subjects but their behaviour may bear little resemblance to that of their wild cousins and even less on humans.

Ethical guidelines must be adhered to when studying either humans or animals and are issued in the UK by the British Psychological Society (BPS). Ethics are agreed social rules and moral responsibilities and obligations, and can change between generations and cultures. When studying humans the BPS give ten guidelines, which begin as follows.

Investigators must consider the general ethical implications and psychological consequences for the participants in their research. This should be done for all participants, taking into account age, sex, personality and ethnic differences. Often the best judges of whether a piece of research is ethically acceptable are the population from which the participants are selected. This can pose a problem however when investigators want to study children or those who are intellectually impaired. Baron-Cohen (1985) carried out a study of autistic children which illustrates this problem clearly.

Participants must have the right to give informed consent, that is they must know as much about the experiment as possible (without invalidating the results) before agreeing to participate. Informed consent is a legally binding contract between the experimenter and the participant. In addition to the basic overview of the experiment itself, any potential harm to the participant, and any potential benefits for the participation, the informed consent must also contain the primary investigator's name(s) and contact information should the participant wish to use it later. Piliavin, Rodin and Piliavin (1969) carried out research into bystander intervention on participants travelling on the New York subway. It was an opportunity sample and participants would not have given their informed consent to participate.

Deception of participants should be avoided at much as possible, but if (in any form) it is to be used in an experiment, it must be justified in terms of the knowledge that is to be gained compared against the harm done to the participant. One example where deception is often used is to control for participant reactivity. Some alternatives to the use of deception include using role-playing in an experiment (Zimbardo, 1973) or naturalistic experiments, among many others.

After the experiment is over, whether deception was used or not, the participant is entitled to a debriefing. During a debriefing, the experimenter reviews the experiment and answers any questions that the participant might have. If there was any deception used in the experiment, the experimenter is obliged to explain it, and the rationale for using it, during the debriefing. After Milgram's experiment, he went to great lengths to debrief the participants, by reuniting them with the 'learner' and reassuring participants that their reactions were not unusual. He also held follow-up interviews to check for no long term damage.

Participants have the freedom to withdraw from an experiment with no negative consequences. Under no circumstances should participants be obligated, forced or coerced into being in an experiment. A participant is free to leave an experiment at any time, even after it has started. Milgram used misleading verbal prompts which greatly pressurised participants to continue, and ignored their desire to withdraw from the experiment.

The right to confidentiality is also applicable to participants. An individual's data must be kept private. In fact, many experiments are designed in ways to prevent even the primary investigator from associating specific individuals with specific data. In some rare cases, the needs of the community at large must be weighed against the rights of the individual to privacy. Participants in experiments are not entitled to learn their individual results, but are entitled to the overall results from a study, and these must be provided if they are requested. Some participants in Zimbardo's prison simulation later sold their stories to a magazine, but this was their choice, and not Zimbardo's.

Participants must also have the right of protection from harm. Investigators should always be aware of potential harmful consequences and should try to remove or minimize them when they occur. If harmful effects are required by the experiment, they must be removed in so much as it is possible after the experiment is over (remove harmful consequences). If for example pain was inflicted as a requirement of the procedure, analgesics must be supplied afterwards if the participant requests them. There has to be a way to contact the experimenter after the experiment is over in case long term damage from the experiment arises. Zimbardo's study became unethical because the subjects began to suffer psychological problems, though it could be argued that the result was totally unexpected and that ethical guidelines of the time were less stringent.

When investigators carry out observational research, it must only take place where those being observed could normally be expected to be observed by strangers, unless the participants give their consent to being observed. Humphrey's (1970) study of homosexual behaviour did not contain the consent of his participants and his observations were not likely to have been observed by strangers. He also broke a number ethics concerning privacy.

On occasion, in the course of research, the investigator may become aware that the participant has a significant psychological or physical problem, of which the participant is not aware of. In such cases, the researcher is obliged to tell the participant and to provide help and information on obtaining appropriate professional advice. However, if a participant solicits advice about a personal problem, as sometimes happens, it is only appropriate for the investigator to give it if it were agreed beforehand as part of the research design. For example, in research involving reading and writing, the psychologist may become aware that the participant is dyslexic, who is unaware of this. The psychologist has an obligation to (sensitively) inform the participant of this, and suggest where and how they can receive appropriate treatment, should the participant wish to do so.

Finally, investigators share responsibility for maintaining high ethic standards in their research and should monitor their own work and that of others. Psychologists should take action if they believe that a colleague is violating any ethical guidelines and principles.

The 1986 Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act was a legislation that came into force to guide all scientists involved in animal research. In addition, every scientist has a personal responsibility to maintain high ethical standards in their work. For this reason, the BPS and the Experimental Psychology Society collaborated to produce their own guidelines for psychologists engaged in animal research.

Psychologists must have a regard for the law by abiding by the 1986 legislation. Ignorance of the law is no excuse for unethical experiments and psychologists risk prosecution if they do not comply.

Investigators should know the species that they are studying, that is to have a sound understanding of the needs, habits and reactions of different animal species, so that one can be chosen which will suffer the least distress from being part of a particular research programme. For example, some animals are social by nature and others are solitary. Housing or caging arrangements must take account of this.

Researchers should not pose a threat to the animal's survival. Field studies should not intrude upon the animal or discourage it from breeding. Rare or endangered species should not be used for experimentation unless the research is a serious attempt at conservation. In laboratory testing, an experimental design which uses the minimum number of animals to maximize effect should be chosen. Techniques of analysis which require the minimum amount of experimental data can be chosen following the advice from statisticians. Psychologists should also ensure that animal suppliers are reputable and that they are competent to breed, house and transport the animals. If animals are to be trapped in the wild, this should be done as humanely as possible.

If animals are confined, harmed, constrained or stressed in any way, psychologists must do all they can to ensure that the knowledge to be gained justifies the means of obtaining it. Alternatives to animal experiments should always be considered and trivial research should be avoided. It is illegal for experimenters to cause an animal pain or stress unless they have the relevant certificates and a Home Office licence. If experimenters are unable to find suitable alternative procedures they must ensure that stress and pain are minimised.

A Home Office licence and relevant certificates are also needed before surgical or pharmacological procedures on animals are permitted. Researchers must be experienced and competent in surgical techniques and in the use of anaesthesia and analgesia. If an animal is judged to be suffering severely and enduring pain, euthanasia should be carried out.

The famous study by Gardner and Gardner (1969) in to cognitive development used an ape called Washoe. This involved the use of a rare and precious animal for an experiment that did not really provide any great benefit to humans or animals. The ape was kept in captivity rather than being in the wild, and could also never be returned to nature after being with humans for so long. This poses questions regarding ethics, and also the welfare of the ape once the study was over and funding ceased.

It is difficult to class some psychological research as unethical, as the ethical guidelines that were present at its time were not as strongly developed, or in some cases were totally absent. Some of the work was ground breaking in its importance, and the researchers had no real idea what might happen. Some also did follow-up studies to check if there were any long-term ill effects of participation in the research.