

Compare and contrast the Psychoanalytic, Behaviourist and Humanist explanations of human behaviour.

The Three main forces in psychology are psychoanalysis, behaviourism, and Humanism. They attempt to explain human behaviour in different ways but some common threads exist throughout. This essay examines what effects human personality and free will, the importance attached to early development by the three theories and the methodology adopted by each.

In psychoanalytic theory human behaviour is defined by unconscious conflict between the Id containing primitive drives and emotions, the conscious super ego which contained ideals, morals and values and the Ego which was mostly conscious steering between the two extremes. In his 'three essays on sexuality' (1915) Sigmund Freud outlines five stages of development from birth to puberty. During each progressive stage the child is fixated on different areas of its body as a focus for pleasure. A proper resolution of the conflict leads the child to progress past one stage onto the next. If there is no resolution the child becomes fixated in that stage causing personality and behavioural disorders. These fixations often manifested themselves as physical symptoms without physical causes. Freud believed that it was unconscious psychic forces that determine human personality and we have little self control or free will.

Eminent behaviourist B.F. Skinner believed, like Freud that we flatter ourselves into thinking we are independent and able to freely will our own actions when in fact free will is an illusion and the mind (unconscious or otherwise) is not worth studying. Whilst Freud thought the cause of human behaviour is the unconscious mind, Skinner believed all human and animal behaviour can be explained by conditioning and the environment. Consequently rat's dogs and pigeons became a major source of research. When a species is presented with a stimulus you receive a predicted response. These responses can be observed and measured and human behaviour can be manipulated by providing a positive response to the required behaviour. Skinner believed human personality to be shaped in the past by reinforcement. Behaviours that have been rewarding are repeated, and things that proved to be unpleasant are avoided in the future.

The humanist Theory contrasts completely with both these explanations. They recognise people can be influenced by causes, but this is not always the case, they have the ability to choose their actions and exercise free will. They believe in self actualisation and people controlling their own lives as potential exists in every individual to seek and achieve self actualisation. The enforces for the humanists is on how you are feeling here and now whilst Freud focused on what happened in the past in form of repressed childhood experiences to explain human behaviour.

Another important contrast is that Freud believed human nature to be fundamentally destructive and irrational; his view of human beings was very pessimistic, whereas humanist psychologists such as Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow saw human beings in a positive optimistic light.

Carl Rogers saw early development as an important factor. When clients (as he liked to call them) were brought up with unconditional positive regard, they were more likely to have a positive view of themselves. He believed children need positive regard to feel loved and accepted. This means that they feel themselves valued by their parents and others even when their behaviours are less than ideal. If parents offer only conditional positive regard -valuing the child only when it is behaving correctly – the child is likely to have a distorted self concept and learns to act in ways that earn approval from others rather than in ways that may be intrinsically more satisfying and real, which may lead to problems later on.

According to Freud 's Theory early development is more than just important, it is all defining as the sexual drive and experiences in this period determines adult personality and any behavioural problems stem from this period.

Between birth and 18 months the child has to progress through the oral stage when the main focus is the mouth. The child gets pleasure from sucking and biting. Insufficient feeding of sucking at this stage can lead to an oral sadistic fixation. Symptoms of this in adults would be sarcasm, nail biting and constant chewing. Over oral stimulation in this stage is likely to produce a person who is reliant on others and cheerfully gullible, could be described as a 'sucker'. Once this stage has been resolved the child moves on to the anal stage which lasts till the age of about three years. In this stage the main focus of pleasure is bowel movements and the control over them. Freud believed that if not enough parental control was exerted this would produce a sloppy disorganized person, where as too much parental control would lead to a stingy, obstinate, obsessively clean person. Between the ages of four and five Freud expects a person to progress through the phallic stage. In this stage the child has discovered its genitals. This is a complex stage involving sexual feelings towards the opposite sex parents and feelings of envy and fear towards the same sex parents. Freud calls this the Oedipus complex in boys, and the Electra complex in girls. The fourth stage, called latency, is from age 5 till puberty when no fixation occurs, and the 5th and final stage is genital, which starts from puberty. Any psychological problems have already occurred by this time.

Skinner and the Behaviourist have the opposite view and attach no particular importance to early development at all. In their opinion all learning and development occurs in the same way regardless of age or species. It is reinforcement conditioning and the environment that influences personality.

The methodology adopted by the humanists and the psychoanalysts was very different from the behaviourists. The humanists and psychoanalysts both developed their theories from case studies and therapy sessions. Freud held clinical interviews to discover the patients' history. The patients were encouraged to relax and talk about their childhood, life and feelings, occasionally prompted by questions. This technique is known as free association. Freud believed occasional slips of the tongue revealed what was truly meant. Hypnosis was used in some early case studies, but he preferred free association. Freud admits most of his case studies were carried out on neurotic middle class Jewish women.

The Humanist's case studies concentrated on the 'whole person'. They used techniques such as role play where clients play the role of significant others in their lives, or several clients act out scenes of emotional significance or form a group and share experiences.

The behaviourists insist psychology should be the study of overt behaviour rather than the inner workings of the mind. They say that the case studies of Freud and the humanists could not be proven so didn't hold any value. The behaviourist research was carried out in a scientific manner in laboratory conditions.

Behaviourist Psychologist's Watson and Raynor carried out research on an eleven month old boy called little Albert. Albert played happily with a white rat in the laboratory, he was unafraid of it. Watson banged a steel bar with a hammer behind Albert's head (out of his view). This frightened Albert and made him cry. This was repeated five times, after which Albert had learned to fear the rat and avoided it. They had conditioned Albert to fear the rat. Pavlov famously carried out research on dogs. He would ring a bell when he presented his dogs with food. The dogs would salivate. Eventually the dogs would salivate when the bell was sounded – even if no food was presented. The dogs had been conditioned to salivate at the sound of a bell.

The Humanist theory attempts to combine what is best from both theories, but in many ways is more similar to the earlier psychodynamic approach – and in other ways completely unique in its own right. All Three forces of psychology are relevant in explaining human behaviour and influencing further research.