

APPROACHES TO AP (AND) PSYCHOLOGY

Purpose of this reading:

The following reading will introduce you to the basics of AP Psychology. In this reading we will:

1. Introduce a useful definition of Psychology.
2. Introduce the EIGHT most important approaches to studying Psychology.

APPROACHES TO PSYCHOLOGY

Essential Task 1-1. Describe, compare, and contrast how different approaches to psychology explain behavior:

- psychoanalytic/psychodynamic, Gestalt, humanism and behaviorism
- cognitive, biological, evolutionary, and social as more contemporary approaches

DEFINITION OF PSYCHOLOGY

If we are going to try to describe, compare AND contrast these 8 approaches to Psychology, then we better understand what Psychology even means. **Psychology is the scientific study of human behavior and mental processes.** There are three key words in this definition: scientific, behavior and mental processes. In order to understand this definition, you'll need to be able to fluently apply each of these to any situation.

1. **Scientific:** Psychology is not just a collection of common sense wisdom or educated guesses. That's philosophy. Psychology is a science because it uses the scientific method. This is a method whereby researchers make careful observations and then research to identify relationships or experiment to test hypotheses. In fact, the scientific method is so crucial to psychology that we will spend our entire first unit studying the research methods used by psychologists. What do they research you ask? Well they apply the scientific method so that they can make claims about human behavior and mental processes.
2. **Behavior:** These are the actions that people take. They can be everything from pressing a lever, to texting a friend, to going to work, or to getting a divorce. The key thing here is that they are actions that can be seen and observed. This is good since the scientific method is based on carefully recording observations.
3. **Mental Processes:** Now you are I know, because we are both humans, that there are many things you think about that you never do . . . like summer reading. You thought you'd get around to it in July, but you never actually did the behavior until yesterday. Sometimes your mental process can be an emotion like sadness, but your behavior when someone asks "How's it going?" can be the exact opposite. "Fine, thanks." Even though on the inside you are a mushy sad jellyfish. Mental processes are the thoughts, memories, emotions and use of language that happen within someone's mind. It gets annoying to say all of that over and over again so psychologists have a term they use whenever they talk about thinking. This is term is cognition. Whenever this term is used please remember that it refers to thinking, emotions, motivation, memory, language use, problem solving and decision making. These are awesome things to study, but the problem is that they are a hard to directly observe. Therefore psychologists have to get pretty creative in their research methods if they want to catch an observable glimpse of human cognition. But just because is it hard, doesn't mean it's impossible and it is certainly worth the effort.

Now that we know what psychology is (the scientific study of both human behavior and mental processes) we can take a look at the various ways that psychologists try to explain the behavior and mental processes of humans. These various ways are called the approaches to psychology. This means there are eight different ways a psychologist can attempt to explain anything humans do or think. From eating behavior to career choice, from depression to love, from the decision to attend a certain college, to buying life insurance, Psychologists will try to explain it all through these 8 approaches. At this point, it is helpful to view the 8 approaches to the study of psychology as eight different Instagram filters. Each can be used on any situation to create slightly different edits, or interpretations, of anything a psychologist would try to explain, which is pretty much everything to do with humans. While a psychologist can use any of these filters, each of us tend to have our favorites. Like me for instance, I usually default to cognitive and behavioral filters whenever I try to explain a situation.

The College Board's essential task groups the approaches into two main categories, older and newer approaches. The older approaches include Psychoanalytic/Psychodynamic, Gestalt, Humanism, and Behaviorism. For the most part,

they started in the first half of the 1900s with psychoanalytic getting its start in the late 1800s. The newer approaches, Cognitive, Biological, Evolutionary, and Social started in the second half of the 1900s. Since essential task 1-3 will have us tracing the growth of psychology I don't think this is *the* most helpful way to group these approaches. You should certainly be able to organize them into these two groups, but a more helpful way to see them is through their relation to the scientific method. Remember, Psychology is first and foremost a science. I would like you to mentally organize the approaches to psychology into two broad groups: approaches that can be easily observed made up of Behavioral, Biological and Social Psychology, and approaches that are hard to observe made up of the Psychoanalytic, and Cognitive approaches. This leaves us with three approaches left over, but those are best seen as outgrowths or reactions to other approaches. Evolutionary psychology is an outgrowth of Biological psychology while Humanism is a reaction to Psychoanalytic psychology. Gestalt psychology is best understood as a particular type of cognitive psychology.

APPROACHES THAT CAN BE EASILY OBSERVED

BEHAVIORAL PSYCHOLOGY

Behavioral psychology studies just what it says it studies, the behaviors of humans. So when you try to explain a situation from the behavioral approach you won't talk about people's brain chemistries, emotional states, or childhoods. You'll simply examine the things in the world around them that caused them to act the way they did. People do things because they have learned that those behaviors work out for them. Reacting a certain way works to keep them safe. Acting a certain way gets them rewards or helps them avoid punishments. It is all about learning from the environment. Behaviorism started in the early 1900s with the work of Ivan Pavlov. He studied how dogs learned to react to the sound of a bell because it signaled the coming of food. His work gave rise to our understanding of something called Classical Conditioning. Classical Conditioning is when someone learns to automatically respond to a signal in their environment because it is warning them that something is about to happen. B.F. Skinner is another major researcher in Behavioral psychology. His work gave rise to our understanding of Operant Conditioning. Operant conditioning is when someone decides to do a behavior in order to get a reward or avoid a punishment. Behavioral Psychology is so concerned with psychology being a science that purists of this approach want to look only study the environment and the external actions of the person. Because you cannot observe the thoughts of the person, they should not be studied. In fact, Behavioral psychologists saw the mind as a black box that could not be opened, observed and therefore studied by psychologists.

Core associations with Behaviorism: Studies behaviors of humans. Concerned with LEARNING from environment. Pavlov's Classical Conditioning and Skinner's Operant Conditioning.

BIOLOGICAL PSYCHOLOGY

Biological psychology studies how the body of a person impacts the person's psychology (remember this means their behavior and mental processes). Have you ever been hungry and then gotten really grumpy? In part this is because your stomach produces ghrelin when you are hungry to tell you to eat. The ghrelin stimulates an anxiety response in your hypothalamus, a structure in the limbic system which is the emotional center of your brain. Your brain chemistry is causing the psychological response of grumpiness. This is a biological explanation for a psychological event. Biological psychology thus studies anything in the physical body that can impact psychological behavior which is pretty much everything. You are a biological organism thus everything psychological that is happening to you is also biologic. In specific, biological psychology studies brain chemistry, brain structures, neurons, and genetics. It is also concerned with anything that can alter the normal functioning of those systems such as legal and illegal drugs, medical illness, and injury. You'll hear many different names for this approach like neuroscience, physiological science, biopsychology or psychobiology. Don't worry they are all addressing this same approach.

Core associations with Biologica Psychology: Studies how the body impacts psychology. Looks at the brain, brain chemistry, genetics, medical illnesses and drugs.

EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY

This is a logical outgrowth of Biological psychology. Evolutionary Psychology tries to explain why humans are the way we are by looking at the adaptive benefits that our current behaviors gave us while we were evolving as a species. Let's go back to hunger induced grumpiness. Humans whose hypothalamus produced an anxiety response when hungry were more motivated to seek out food and more likely to reproduce and share this trait. Thus we can explain this modern behavior by looking at how it helped our ancestors survive. Language is another great example. Mutations in the human brain that allowed for complex language were better equipped to work together, find a mate, and pass on those genes. Thus the genes mutations that became our language processing centers exist because they gave our ancestors an adaptive edge.

Core associations with Evolutionary Psychology: Explains why humans are the way we are. Looks at the adaptive benefits to explain human behavior.

SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

Social psychology is the study of how other people impact your behavior and mental processes and how you impact their behavior and mental processes. It also studies group behavior and dynamics. It is sometimes called Socio-Cultural Psychology as it will look at the social differences among humans. For example, Westerner cultures (the Americas and Europe) tend to be more individualistic while Eastern Cultures (Asia) tend to be more collectivistic. Two of the most famous researchers in this field of psychology are Stanley Milgram and Philip Zimbardo. They did two of the most interesting social psychology experiments ever, they also happened to be two of the most highly unethical experiments as well because they caused psychological harm to the participants. We will study both of these later, but in summary Milgram found that humans will obey an authority figure even when it means hurting others and Zimbardo found that a situation can be so powerful that it can make seemingly normal people do some pretty nasty things.

Core associations with Social Psychology: Study of people's impact on you and you on them. Studies groups. Milgram's Obedience Experiment and Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment.

APPROACHES THAT ARE HARD TO OBSERVE

PSYCHOANALYTIC/PSYCHODYNAMIC

Oh, Freud. Ok, let's get a few things out of the way. You can call this approach either psychoanalytic or psychodynamic. Sigmund Freud, the father of this approach to psychology, used both. He worked in the late 1800s and his approach to psychology became so popular that he is probably the only psychologist's name you knew before taking this class. Just because he is popular, doesn't mean he is right. While modern psychology will use a lot of Freud's work, some of it is just plain wrong. In its more simplistic form, psychodynamic psychology views the human personality as an energy system fueled by sexual and aggressive desires. The personality is made up of 3 different parts: the id which wants to fulfill every last one of those desires and then go back for seconds, the super ego that wants to be perfect and is disgusted by the id, and finally the ego which needs to keep the peace. Much of this battle goes on below the surface of conscious awareness called the unconscious. In fact, the id is completely submerged in the unconscious. So remember a few seconds ago when you said to yourself that you don't have any sexual and aggressive desires, well that was the conscious part of your super ego talking. Your id was in your unconscious making a list a mile long. Freud believed that these drives built up energy in the unconscious and, if not released, would cause mental illness. Thus your ego needs to find ways to get your id what it wants without disgusting the super ego. Freud believed that you learned how to deal with this conflict early in life and thus childhood is really important to shaping your personality. Freud's work was continued by his student Carl Jung and later on by the Neo-Freudians. One of the biggest complaints about this approach to psychology is that it is really, really hard to observe. Just think about it, not even the subject knows about their unconscious desires so how can the research observe them? Psychoanalytic psychology is not very scientific. In fact, behaviorism was a reaction to psychoanalytic psychology.

Core associations with Psychoanalytic Psychology: Unconscious sexual and aggressive desires drive our behavior. Personality is formed in childhood. Id, Ego, and Superego are the three parts of the human personality. Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung

HUMANISTIC PSYCHOLOGY

Did you notice how depressing and pessimistic psychoanalytic psychology is? You have these deep dark desires that are constantly building up negative energy and dragging you down. You are kind of nasty and perverted. Sigh. Well a reaction to psychoanalytic psychology is Humanistic Psychology. Humanistic psychology keeps the notion of the unconscious but instead of the downward pull, believes that humans have the ability to become better and reach their full potential. Humanistic psychology instead focuses on an upward pull to become better because hey, you aren't dead yet. This is the smallest of the approaches that we'll work with in our class. Key theorists in this field include Carl Rogers and his notion of a self-actualizing tendency along with Abraham Maslow and his notion of self-actualization.

Core associations with Humanistic Psychology: Humans can get better and achieve their full potential. Rogers and Maslow.

COGNITIVE

I saved the best for last, or at least that's my bias talking. Cognitive psychology is the study of the mental processes. Remember this term includes thinking, emotions, motivation, memory, language usage, problem solving and decision making. Now these things are really hard to see. The Behaviorists called the human mind the black box for a good reason. To be able to study something as a science you have to be able to observe it. In the 1960s technological advances in brain imaging allowed for a cognitive psychology revolution of sorts. Behaviorism was all the rage in the mid-1900s just like Freud had been all the rage in the late 1800s. But with the development of new brain imaging techniques that allowed psychologists to see the workings of the human brain, observations could be made about cognition and thus this field of psychology started to explode. Now we have brain imaging devices like the fMRI that can see not only the structure of the brain but we can watch it functioning. We can peer into the black box. Another way that cognitive psychologists study mental processes is to creatively craft experiments that allow us to study mental processes by looking at the behaviors they cause. Thus a cognitive psychologist might have a group of students learn with concept maps and a group just read the text and then compare the results.

Core associations with Cognitive Psychology: thinking, emotions, motivation, memory, language usage, problem solving and decision making.

GESTALT PSYCHOLOGY

From the German word meaning "the whole" this approach to psychology deals with a specific aspect of human cognition called perception. This group of psychologists wanted to understand how humans perceived the world around them so efficiently despite often lacking the necessary sensory information. Often what we perceive is greater than the sum of the sensory parts we are given. This approach to psychology evolved over time to apply to the person as well. When you look at Gestalt psychology as a therapy method it is concerned about making the person whole again by having them understand that their physical and psychological problems are linked.

Core associations with Gestalt Psychology: Perception, the whole

Well there you have it. Eight approaches to psychology that will take us a year to fully introduce. Here's how our units line up with the different approaches.

Cognitive Psychology

Unit 1: Motivation, Emotion and Stress

Unit 2: Memory

Unit 4: Perception (Gestalt Psychology) and States of Consciousness

Unit 6: Cognition

Unit 7: Intelligence and Testing

Biological Psychology

Unit 3: Biological Psychology

Unit 4: Sensation and States of Consciousness

Unit 8: Stress

Behavioral Psychology

Unit 5: Learning

Psychoanalytic and Humanistic

Unit 10: Personality

All of the Approaches at once

Unit 9: Development

Unit 11: Mental Illness and Therapies

Social Psychology

Unit 12: Social Psychology