

Unit: Psychological Perspectives

Anticipatory Set (to introduce the 5 approaches):

The True Story of Kathy O.

Method:

1. Read story of Kathy O aloud to class to stimulate interest. Form small groups at end of story and have groups come up with their reason (s) to explain Kathy's bizarre behavior.
2. Poll groups for "their" opinions.
3. Introduce idea of different approaches in psychology (from textbook or attached *Ways to View Behavior* handout)
4. Read or give the students the 5 different explanations of Kathy O's behavior from different perspectives.
5. **Guided Practice**- assign groups to examine the "Case Study of Billy". Answer questions and complete Part B

Kathy O.

As the runners lined up to start the 1986 NCAA 10,000-meter championship race, Kathy O. was the odds-on favorite. She had broken high school track records in three distances and recently set a new American collegiate record for the 10,000-meter race. Her parents, always supportive fans, watched from the sidelines. Kathy got off to a slow start, but she was only a few paces behind the leaders. Her fans knew she could soon catch up. But this time Kathy didn't bolt to the lead. Instead, she veered away from the other runners. Without breaking her stride, she ran off the track, scaled a 7-foot fence, raced down a side street, and jumped off a 50-foot bridge. Ten minutes later, her coach found her on the concrete floodplain of the *White River*. She had two broken ribs and a punctured lung, and she was paralyzed from the waist down. Not only would she never run again, she might never walk again.

10/2/11

What happened to Kathy? Why did she quit the race and nearly self-destruct? As a star athlete and a premed student on the dean's list, Kathy had everything going for her. She had been valedictorian of her high school class. Teachers and coaches described her as sweet, sensible, diligent, courteous, and religious. Nobody understood her behavior. It didn't make sense.

WHY DO YOU THINK KATHY ACTED THIS WAY?

Explanations of Kathy O's behavior from 5 different perspectives

Biological Approach

The **biological approach** to Kathy O.'s behavior would assume that biochemical processes account for her experience. Perhaps the stress of running aggravated an undetected physical disease (such as a thyroid disorder) and interfered with Kathy's ability to control her behavior. The biological approach is also concerned with hereditary factors. Could Kathy have inherited a brain chemistry or a biologically based temperament that prevented her from controlling her self-destructive impulse to flee? While heredity cannot be changed, once these influences are understood, people like Kathy can be helped with medication and other forms of therapy. Perhaps, Kathy took a large dose of amphetamines right before the race and this triggered a temporary schizophrenic episode where she "heard voices" to jump.

Psychodynamic Approach

Applying the psychodynamic perspective to the case of Kathy O we wonder what forces and desires could have driven her so hard that she "snapped" and lost control. Perhaps as a child she tried to please her parents or overcome feelings of inadequacy by excelling and becoming a "winner". When she doubted her ability to keep this up, perhaps she panicked and tried, irrationally to "escape" painful failure by ending her life. Therapy based on the psychodynamic approach might be undertaken for individuals who feel pressures and self-expectations building up, in order to intervene before the person "snaps".

Behaviorist Approach

We would expect a behaviorist to examine the mystery of Kathy O. in a very different way from the biological or psychodynamic search for inner causes. More likely, a behaviorist would rule out any speculation about Kathy's "inner states" as impossible to confirm no one can know what Kathy was thinking or feeling. Instead, we should focus on Kathy's observable behavior and the factors that might have influenced it. Just before Kathy "snapped", she was falling behind in the race. In past races, how did

she react when she fell behind? Did falling behind usually mean she would lose the race? Were past losses followed by aversive experiences like disapproval or derision consequences she would want to avoid experiencing yet again? By analyzing Kathy's reinforcement history and her most recent behavior and its consequences, the behaviorist would seek to explain her sudden, tragic flight.

Cognitive Approach

The cognitive perspective on the case of Kathy O. invites us to look "inside Kathy's head." As behaviorists note, we cannot directly observe inner processes or know what Kathy was thinking -- but we are fairly certain that Kathy was thinking and that her thoughts had some impact on her behavior. During the race, what was Kathy paying attention to? Did she notice who was watching her? Could she have felt distracted? Did running prevent her from thinking clearly so that her fear of losing the race overwhelmed her? The cognitive approach assumes there are connections between what people perceive, think, decide, and do. To understand human action we must first understand human cognition.

Humanistic Approach

From a humanistic perspective, Kathy O.'s actions would be seen as the outcome of Kathy's own view of herself and her world. Was Kathy's self-image tied of feeling loved and respected only when she competed successfully? Was she testing her friends and family to see how they would deal with her failure? Was she trying to dramatically change the basis of her sense of "self worth"? Only Kathy can answer these questions, and only her answers would satisfy a humanistic psychologist's questions about why she ended her races and almost her life -- so tragically.