

Approaches to Psychology (Theoretical Perspectives)

There are various approaches in contemporary [psychology](#).

An approach is a perspective (i.e., view) that involves certain assumptions (i.e., beliefs) about human behavior: the way they function, which aspects of them are worthy of study and what research methods are appropriate for undertaking this study.

There may be several different theories within an approach, but they all share these common assumptions.

The five major perspectives in psychology are biological, psychodynamic, behavioral, cognitive and humanistic.

You may wonder why there are so many different psychological approaches and whether one approach is correct and another wrong.

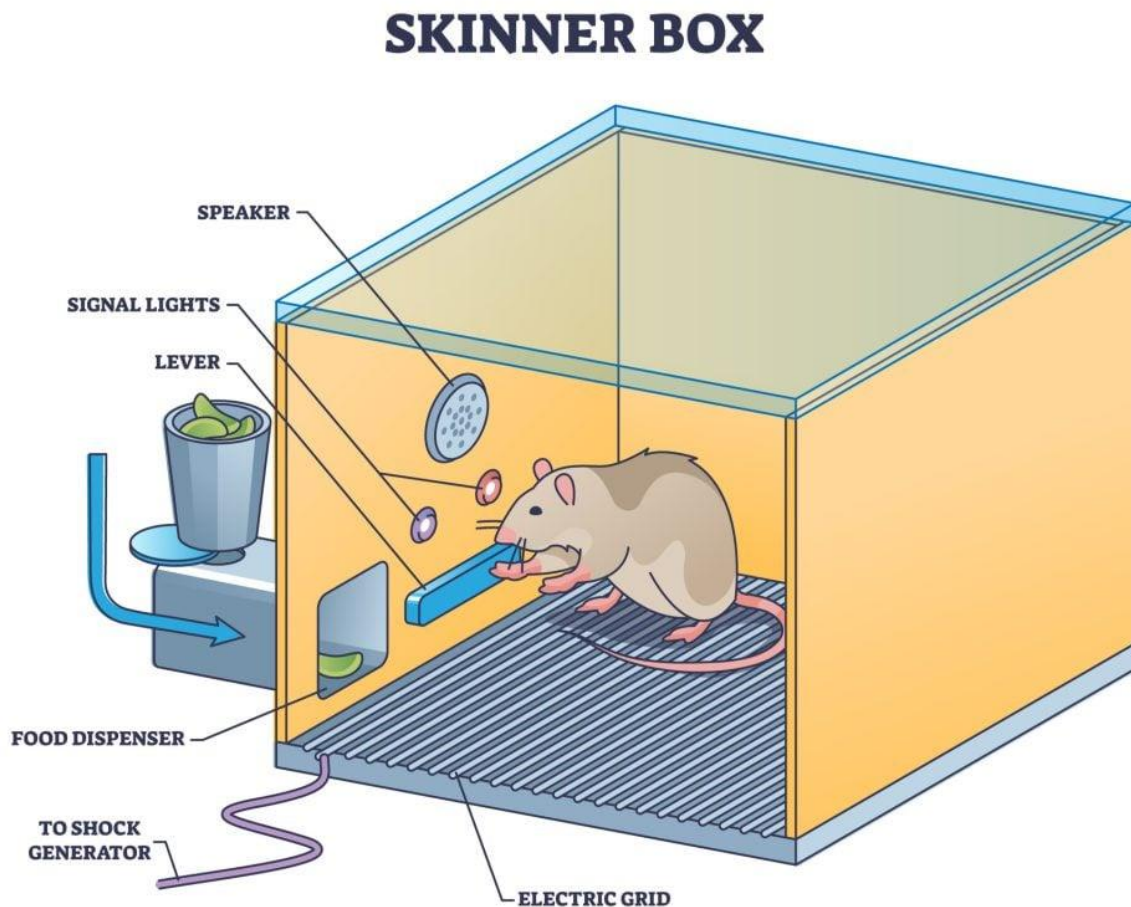
Most psychologists would agree that no one approach is correct, although in the past, in the early days of psychology, the behaviorist would have said their perspective was the only truly [scientific](#) one.

Each approach has its strengths and weaknesses, and brings something different to our understanding of human behavior. For this reason, it is important that psychology does have different perspectives on the understanding and study of human and animal behavior.

Below is a summary of the six main psychological approaches (sometimes called perspectives) in psychology .

Behaviorist Perspective

If your layperson's idea of psychology has always been about people in laboratories wearing white coats and watching hapless rats try to negotiate mazes in order to get to their dinner, then you are probably thinking about [behavioral psychology](#).



Behaviorism is different from most other approaches because they view people (and animals) as controlled by their environment and specifically that we are the result of what we have learned from our environment. The behaviorist perspective is concerned with how environmental factors (called stimuli) affect observable behavior (called the response).

The behaviorist perspective proposes two main processes whereby people learn from their environment: namely classical conditioning and operant conditioning. Classical conditioning involves learning by association, and operant conditioning involves learning from the consequences of behavior.

Classical conditioning (CC) was studied by the Russian psychologist Ivan Pavlov. Though looking into natural reflexes and neutral stimuli he managed to condition dogs to salivate to the sound of a bell through repeated association with the sound of the bell and food.

The principles of CC have been applied in many therapies. These include systematic desensitization for phobias (step-by-step exposed to a feared stimulus at once) and aversion therapy.

B.F. Skinner investigated operant conditioning of voluntary and involuntary behavior. Skinner felt that some behavior could be explained by the person's motive. Therefore behavior occurs for a reason, and the three main behavior shaping techniques are positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement, and punishment.

Behaviorism also believes in scientific methodology (e.g., controlled experiments), and that only observable behavior should be studied because this can be objectively measured. Behaviorism rejects the idea that people have free will, and believes that the environment determines all behavior. Behaviorism is the scientific study of observable behavior working on the basis that behavior can be reduced to learned S-R (Stimulus-Response) units.

Behaviorism has been criticized in the way it under-estimates the complexity of human behavior. Many studies used animals which are hard to generalize to humans, and it cannot explain, for example, the speed in which we pick up language. There must be biological factors involved.

Psychodynamic Perspective

Who hasn't heard of [Sigmund Freud](#) ? So many expressions of our daily life come from Freud's theories of psychoanalysis – subconscious, denial, repression and anal personality to name only a few.



Freud believes that events in our childhood can have a significant impact on our behavior as adults. He also believed that people have little free will to make choices in life. Instead, our behavior is determined by the unconscious mind and childhood experiences.

Freud's psychoanalysis is both a theory and therapy. It is the original [psychodynamic theory](#) and inspired psychologists such as [Jung](#) and [Erikson](#) to develop their own psychodynamic theories. Freud's work is vast, and he has contributed greatly to psychology as a discipline.

Freud, the founder of [psychoanalysis](#), explained the human mind as like an iceberg, with only a small amount of it being visible, that is our observable behavior, but it is the unconscious, submerged mind that has the most, underlying influence on our behavior. Freud used three main methods of accessing the [unconscious mind](#): free association, dream analysis and slips of the tongue.

He believed that the unconscious mind consisted of three components: the “[id](#)” the “[ego](#)” and the “[superego](#).” The “id” contains two main instincts: “Eros”, which is the life instinct, which involves self-preservation and sex which is fuelled by the “libido” energy force. “Thanatos” is the death instinct, whose energies, because they are less powerful than those of “Eros” are channeled away from ourselves and into aggression towards others.

The “id” and the “superego” are constantly in conflict with each other, and the “ego” tries to resolve the discord. If this conflict is not resolved, we tend to use [defense mechanisms](#) to reduce our anxiety. Psychoanalysis attempts to help patients resolve their inner conflicts.

An aspect of psychoanalysis is Freud’s theory of [psychosexual development](#). It shows how early experiences affect adult personality. Stimulation of different areas of the body is important as the child progresses through the important developmental stages. Too much or too little can have bad consequences later.

The most important stage is the phallic stage where the focus of the libido is on the genitals. During this stage little boys experience the “[Oedipus complex](#)”, and little girls experience the “[Electra complex](#).” These complexes result in children identifying with their same-sex parent, which enables them to learn sex-appropriate behavior and a moral code of conduct.

However, it has been criticized in the way that it over emphasizes the importance of sexuality and under emphasized the role of social relationships. The theory is not scientific, and can’t be proved as it is

circular. Nevertheless, psychoanalysis has been greatly contributory to psychology in that it has encouraged many modern theorists to modify it for the better, using its basic principles, but eliminating its major flaws.

Humanistic Perspective

Humanistic psychology is a psychological perspective that emphasizes the study of the whole person (known as holism). Humanistic psychologists look at human behavior, not only through the eyes of the observer, but through the eyes of the person doing the behaving.

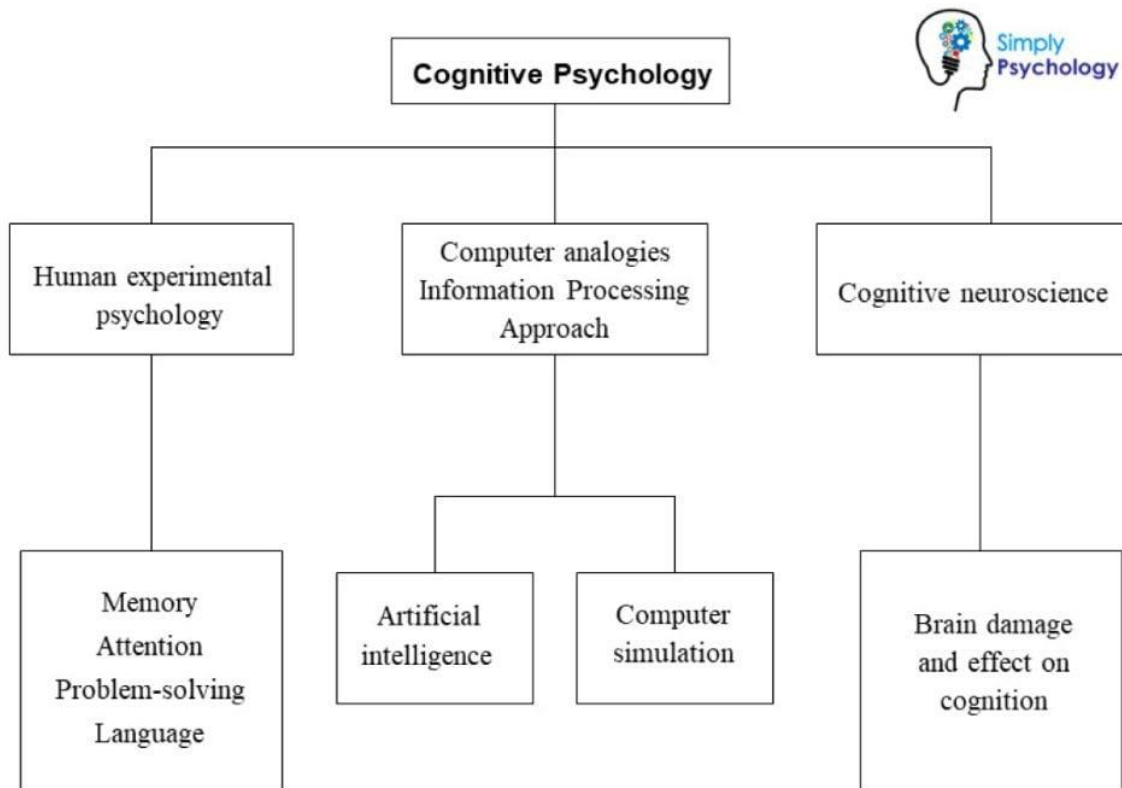
Humanistic psychologists believe that an individual's behavior is connected to his inner feelings and self-image. The humanistic perspective centers on the view that each person is unique and individual, and has the free will to change at any time in his or her life.

The humanistic perspective suggests that we are each responsible for our own happiness and well-being as humans. We have the innate (i.e., inborn) capacity for self-actualization, which is our unique desire to achieve our highest potential as people.

Because of this focus on the person and his or her personal experiences and subjective perception of the world the humanists regarded scientific methods as inappropriate for studying behavior.

Two of the most influential and enduring theories in humanistic psychology that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s are those of Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow.

Cognitive Perspective



Psychology was institutionalized as a science in 1879 by [Wilhelm Wundt](#), who found the first psychological laboratory.

His initiative was soon followed by other European and American Universities. These early laboratories, through experiments, explored areas such as memory and sensory perception, both of which Wundt believed to be closely related to physiological processes in the brain.

The whole movement had evolved from the early philosophers, such as Aristotle and Plato. Today this approach is known as [cognitive psychology](#).

Cognitive Psychology revolves around the notion that if we want to know what makes people tick then the way to do it is to figure out what processes are actually going on in their minds. In other words,

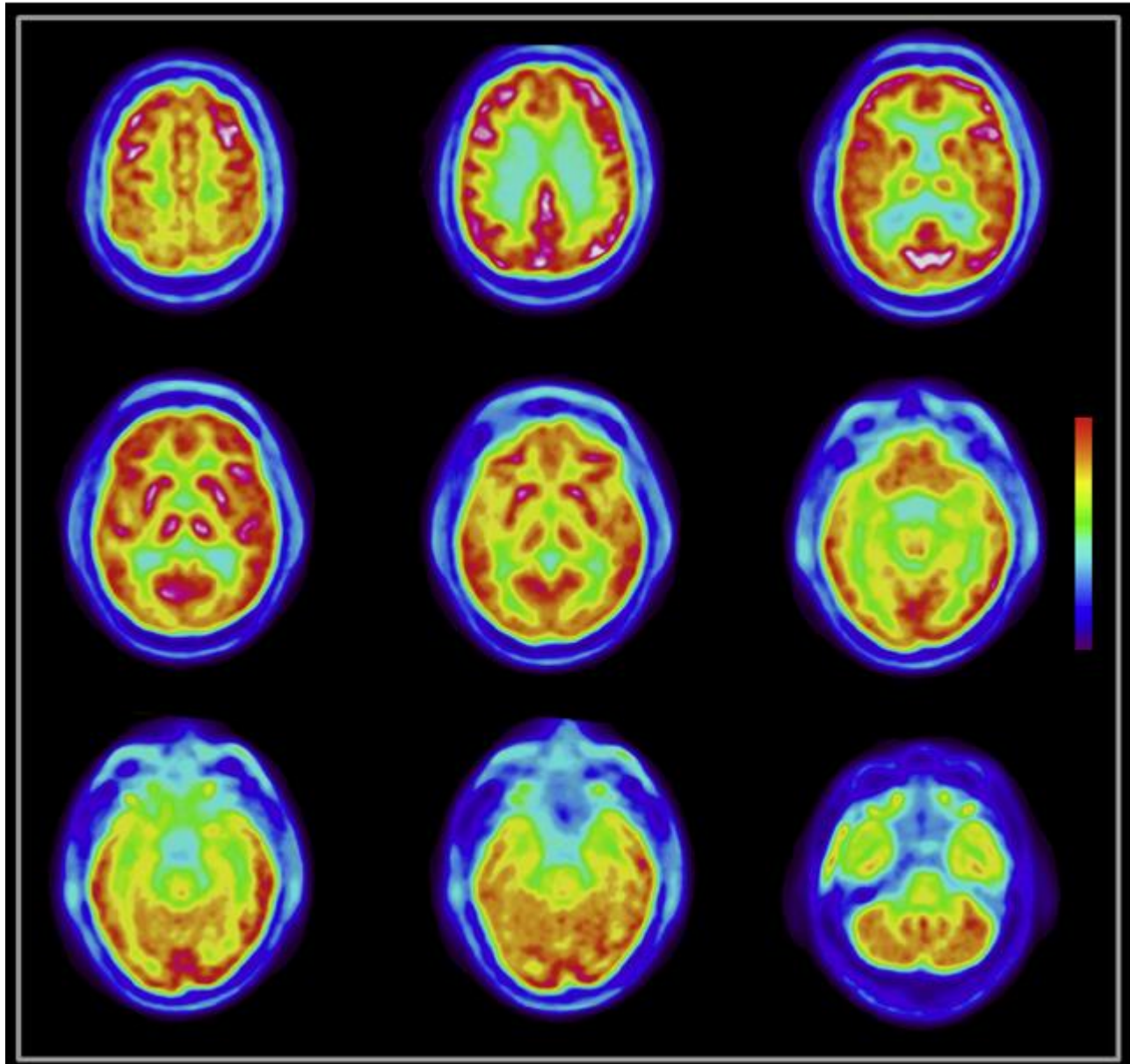
psychologists from this perspective study cognition which is ‘the mental act or process by which knowledge is acquired.’

The cognitive perspective is concerned with “mental” functions such as [memory](#), [perception](#), [attention](#), etc. It views people as being similar to computers in the way we process information (e.g., input-process-output). For example, both human brains and computers process information, store data and have input an output procedure.

This had led cognitive psychologists to explain that memory comprises of three stages: encoding (where information is received and attended to), storage (where the information is retained) and retrieval (where the information is recalled).

It is an extremely [scientific approach](#) and typically uses lab experiments to study human behavior. The cognitive approach has many applications including [cognitive therapy](#) and [eyewitness testimony](#) .

Biological Psychology



The biological perspective states that all thoughts, feeling & behavior ultimately have a biological cause. It is one of the major perspectives in psychology and involves such things as studying the brain, genetics, hormones, and the immune and nervous systems.

Theorists in the biological perspective who study behavioral genomics consider how genes affect behavior. Now that the human genome is

mapped, perhaps, we will someday understand more precisely how behavior is affected by the DNA we inherit. Biological factors such as chromosomes, hormones and the brain all have a significant influence on human behavior, for example, [gender](#) .

The [biological approach](#) believes that most behavior is inherited and has an adaptive (or evolutionary) function. For example, in the weeks immediately after the birth of a child, levels of testosterone in fathers drop by more than 30 percent.

This has an evolutionary function. Testosterone-deprived men are less likely to wander off in search of new mates to inseminate. They are also less aggressive, which is useful when there is a baby around.

Biological psychologists explain behaviors in neurological terms, i.e., the physiology and structure of the brain and how this influences behavior.

Many biological psychologists have concentrated on abnormal behavior and have tried to explain it. For example, biological psychologists believe that schizophrenia is affected by levels of dopamine (a neurotransmitter).

These findings have helped psychiatry take off and help relieve the symptoms of [mental illness](#) through drugs. However, Freud and other disciplines would argue that this just treats the symptoms and not the cause.

This is where health psychologists take the finding that biological psychologists produce and look at the environmental factors that are involved to get a better picture.

Evolutionary Psychology

A central claim of evolutionary psychology is that the brain (and therefore the mind) evolved to solve problems encountered by our hunter-gatherer ancestors during the upper Pleistocene period over 10,000 years ago.

The Evolutionary approach explains behavior in terms of the selective pressures that shape behavior. Most behaviors that we see/display are believed to have developed during our EEA (environment of evolutionary adaptation) to help us survive.



Observed behavior is likely to have developed because it is adaptive. It has been naturally selected, i.e., individuals who are best adapted to survive and reproduce. behaviors may even be sexually selected, i.e., individuals who are most successful in gaining access to mates leave behind more offspring.

The mind is therefore equipped with ‘instincts’ that enabled our ancestors to survive and reproduce.

A strength of this approach is that it can explain behaviors that appear dysfunctional, such as anorexia, or behaviors that make little sense in a modern context, such as our biological [stress response](#) when finding out we are overdrawn at the bank.

Perspectives Conclusion

Therefore, in conclusion, there are so many different perspectives in psychology to explain the different types of behavior and give different angles. No one perspective has explanatory powers over the rest.

Only with all the different types of psychology, which sometimes contradict one another (nature-nurture debate), overlap with each other (e.g. psychoanalysis and child psychology) or build upon one another

(biological and health psychologist) can we understand and create effective solutions when problems arise, so we have a healthy body and a healthy mind.

The fact that there are different perspectives represents the complexity and richness of human (and animal) behavior. A scientific approach, such as Behaviorism or cognitive psychology, tends to ignore the subjective (i.e., personal) experiences that people have.

The humanistic perspective does recognize human experience, but largely at the expense of being non-scientific in its methods and ability to provide evidence. The psychodynamic perspective concentrates too much on the unconscious mind and childhood. As such, it tends to lose sight of the role of socialization (which is different in each country) and the possibility of free will.

The biological perspective reduces humans to a set of mechanisms and physical structures that are clearly essential and important (e.g., genes). However, it fails to account for consciousness and the influence of the environment on behavior.