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Theory of Knowledge

Psychology's Three Great Branches

Pairing the three great branches of psychology with three grand theorists.

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Looking across the vast and complicated field of psychology today, it is easy to become confused. Is psychology a natural science like biology? Is it a social science like anthropology? Is it primarily a profession like medicine? Is it about behavior or the conscious mind? Is its subject matter about animals in general, mammals, or just humans?

The 50+ divisions of the American Psychological Association (APA) doesn't result in much clarity, nor does the **definition offered by the APA:**

“Psychology is the study of the mind and behavior. The discipline embraces all aspects of the human experience — from the functions of the brain to the actions of nations, from child development to care for the aged. In every conceivable setting from scientific research centers to mental health care ser-

vices, 'the understanding of behavior' is the enterprise of psychologists.”

This definition is an awkward blend of key historical disputes in the field.

Based on the unified framework I have developed, we can bring clarity to this mess. One of the first things we should do is recognize that the institution of psychology consists of three great branches that are related but also clearly separable branches of inquiry.

The three branches are:

1. The basic science of psychology, whose proper subject matter is “mental behavior” which translates into the behavior of the animal as a whole and includes thinking and feeling as well as acting;
2. Human psychology, whose proper subject matter is human behavior at the individual level and includes a particular focus on the human mind and human self-consciousness
3. Professional psychology, which involves the application of psychological knowledge for human betterment.

If the APA started with these three great branches, much confusion could be avoided and we could actually make progress starting to clear up **psychology's tower of Babel**.

To foster understanding of the three great branches, they can be usefully be associated to three of psychology's greatest contributors: B. F. Skinner is the icon associated with basic psychology; Sigmund Freud with human psychology; and Carl Rogers with professional psychology.

1. B.F. Skinner and the Basic Science of Psychology

The basic science of psychology has as its subject matter, mental behavior. Mental behavior refers to the unique ways in which animals behave relative to other entities and includes both covert processes (i.e., conscious and unconscious cognition) and overt actions. It corresponds to “Mind” on the [Tree of Knowledge System](#).

Skinner is associated with the formal science of psychology because he argued that psychology: 1) has as its proper subject matter the behavior of the animal-as-a-whole, which we are now referring to as mental behavior; 2) is differentiated from biology with the same logic that biology was differentiated from chemistry because animal behavior evolved as a function of the selection of consequences in a manner that had direct parallel to the evolution of life; and 3) is a purely natural science discipline.

2. Sigmund Freud and Human Psychology

Human psychology is a unique and separate sub-discipline from basic psychology. The reason is simple. Because of symbolic language, culture, and human self-consciousness, humans operate on a different dimension of complexity than other animals ([dimension 4 on the ToK System](#)). The APA is really an association devoted to Human Psychology, as its definition suggests.

Although William James would have also made a good choice, Sigmund Freud is the icon I associate with the discipline of human psychology. This is because Freud had an enormous impact on the discipline (far greater than anyone

else) and he, more clearly than anyone else: 1) identified key aspects of the dynamic relationship between self-conscious processes and subconscious motives and emotions; and 2) saw the connections between the justifications that individuals offer to maintain psychic equilibrium and the cultural narratives, myths, and taboos that coordinate populations of people.

3. Carl Rogers and Professional Psychology

The fundamental task of professional psychology is not to describe animal or human behavior but instead is to improve the human condition. This is what makes it a more value-laden and prescriptive than the other branches.

Carl Rogers is the icon I associate with the profession of psychology, as he was the most influential humanistic psychologist and because he: 1) identified the centrality of the therapeutic relationship and associated factors like empathy and acceptance in fostering human change during psychotherapy; and 2) recognized that the vision of the human condition afforded by the science of psychology had important implications for how people were viewed and treated.

He argued passionately that the vision of humanity offered by both psychoanalysis and behaviorism was too deterministic, limited, and pessimistic, and that psychology could and should offer a more hopeful, uplifting message regarding human potential.

I also emphasize Rogers because of the way he valued people, and that one of his foundational insights was that the quality of the therapeutic relationship is central to the psy-

chotherapeutic processes. As I tell my students, good therapy begins with Rogers.

It is important to recognize that these three icons were the primary leaders in the three great paradigms in American psychology—behaviorism, psychoanalysis, and humanistic psychology—thus suggesting a link between the three great branches of the discipline and the three most historically significant schools of thought.

The reasonableness of associating each of the three great branches with these icons is supported by a fascinating book by Amy Demorest (2005) titled *Psychology's Grand Theorists: How Personal Experiences Shaped Professional Ideas*. In it, she offers powerful profiles of Skinner, Freud, and Rogers, articulating how their unique life patterns were associated with the ideas they promoted. I found Demorest's justification for choosing these figures especially heartening and supportive of the heuristic formulation offered here. She wrote, "As prime representatives of what historically have been the three dominant [forces] in psychology, Freud, Skinner, and Rogers were all obvious choices" (2005, p. xi).

So next time you are trying to wrap your head around the question, "What is psychology?" think of it as a discipline with three great branches, whose foundational insights were identified by one of psychology's grand theorists.



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