

## International Baccalaureate: Perspectives in Psychology



### LIMITATIONS OF DIFFERENT APPROACHES

#### 1. BIOLOGICAL APPROACH

Firstly, on a positive note, this is the only approach that attempts to relate behaviour to the workings and genetic makeup of the body. Other approaches might favour a view that is biologically based (e.g. psychoanalysis) but the concepts used and phenomena studied are largely psychological rather than physiological. This approach does, of course, have a number of limitations:

- (a) Although biological Psychology has accumulated quite a lot of information about behaviour, there are a number of concepts that it cannot yet fully explain. The main ones among these are memory, stress, learning, emotions. All these aspects of Psychology need input from other approaches to provide a more complete explanation of behaviour.
- (b) The human physiological system is so complex and involves so many interactions with the environment that it is very difficult to explain behaviour in purely physiological terms. This makes it very difficult to draw conclusions based simply on one factor: for example, the genetic basis of intelligence cannot be explained in biological terms alone; family factors and cultural influences must be taken into account too (Kamin, 1974).
- (c) The approach tends to be reductionist, trying to explain all behaviour ultimately in terms of physiological action. This can mean that psychological explanations are rejected. It may be that we should acknowledge that physiological mechanisms underlie any behaviour that we make, but that explaining behaviour solely in physiological terms is not necessarily useful. For example, telling a person that they have depression because of a series of chemical reactions in their body might be accurate, but simply treating the chemical reactions without looking at factors like personality, living circumstances and family situation would not help at all. Also, imagine how useful it would be for parents to know which part of the brain controlled speech if they were trying to teach their child to talk: psychological knowledge about language development would be **much** more useful.
- (d) An approach that tries to explain behaviour in evolutionary terms can also be somewhat problematic. The difficulties that biologists have encountered trying to explain behaviours such as altruism is a case in point. Altruism makes no sense in survival terms, so makes things difficult for an evolutionary explanation. Of course the solution to this has been to come up with ideas about the "selfish gene" (Dawkins, 1976), but a much more parsimonious way of looking at this might be to use a psychological explanation (maybe a humanistic one?).

#### 2. THE PSYCHOANALYTIC APPROACH

First, a word or two about the good things. Freud's theory has made a major contribution to personality research: his ideas about the influence of the child's

early years were an innovation and have profoundly affected a great deal of subsequent research. Researchers such as Erikson, Jung and Fromm have been influenced by Freud and his influence even reaches into diverse areas such as art, literature, cinema and even history. However, there are a number of limitations to this approach.

- (a) It is difficult, if not impossible, to generate testable hypotheses about most of the processes (such as defence mechanisms, instinctual drives) Freud describes (Eysenck & Wilson, 1973).
- (b) His clinical case study method is not supported by quantitative data or statistical analyses and his theory is therefore left vague and difficult to verify (Eysenck & Wilson, 1973).
- (c) It is also very difficult to assess the effectiveness of psychoanalysis as a therapy. The main problem is a lack of clear definition of what a "cure" might be. Eysenck (1952) claimed that of the five case studies he reviewed he could find no evidence to suggest that these people would have been any different without therapy.

### 3. BEHAVIOURIST APPROACH

First the good stuff: behaviourism offered the nearest thing to a paradigm that Psychology has got. Also, it provided a number of techniques for changing unwanted behaviour. Its use of empirical methods gave more credibility to Psychology as a science. However .....

- (a) It ignores conscious and subjective experience and suggests that nothing important takes place in between stimulus and response. The role of cognitive factors is ignored and their importance minimised. Cognition and Social Learning Theory suggests that perception, attention, memory and thinking are all vitally important processes that have a huge effect on the response.
- (b) It doesn't acknowledge the role of biological factors in behaviour. It suggests everything we do and everything we are is learned and does not really allow for behaviours that are largely a result of genetic inheritance.
- (c) It takes a strongly deterministic view, suggesting that we are all at the mercy of our environment (environmental determinism) and leaving no place for free will. The humanists suggest that we all exercise free will in our behaviour.
- (d) Neither classical or operant conditioning can account for the production of novel behaviour. Where does the behaviour come from in the first place so that it can be conditioned? Social Learning theorists can account for novel behaviour very effectively - they suggest that we imitate others and that novel behaviour is simply behaviour that we have seen others produce.
- (e) It tends to use animals in research and the ethics and value of this has been questioned. Can we really generalise from animal behaviour?
- (f) Use of behavioural techniques to treat atypical behaviours have been criticised for treating the symptoms and ignoring the causes.

#### 4. COGNITIVE APPROACH

First the good: it emphasises the importance of mediational processes between stimulus and response (the S-O-R approach) and the research it has produced has increased understanding of these mediational processes. In practical terms, it has offered insight into, for example, ways that memory can be improved and how attention can be better sustained. The drawbacks are:

- (a) It has a definite lack of coherence: that is, it really doesn't all hang together! There is no single, integrated theory of cognition, but there are lots of little theories about specific aspects of cognition. For example, there are theories about memory, perception, thinking; there are also theories about the cognitive aspects of emotion.
- (b) There is no single, motivating theorist in cognition; unlike psychoanalysis, which has Freud, biology which has Darwin, Humanistic Psychology which has Maslow and Rogers, Behaviourism which has Skinner (this could be why there is no basic underlying theory of cognition).
- (c) The information processing metaphor that is drawn from computers emphasises "man as machine" and perhaps failed to recognise fundamental differences that exist between computers and people. For example, people forget, computers do not, people are emotional and irrational, computers are logical.
- (d) There is a wide use of the experimental method in cognition. This has been criticised as being too artificial and not true to life: how often do you process a list of nonsense syllables? People's behaviour and ways of processing information might be influenced by the experimental setting and by the experimenter her/himself.

#### 5. THE HUMANISTIC (OR PHENOMENOLOGICAL) APPROACH

Again, first the good. For many years Psychology was dominated by two schools: psychoanalytical and behaviourist. Then, in the late 50s early 60s a "third force" appeared: humanistic Psychology. They reject the scientific method as being inappropriate for the study of humans, which has encouraged many Psychologists to look for more appropriate, innovative methods. They believe that the main aim of Psychology should be to help people maximise their potential for personal growth, which offered a more positive, optimistic view of people than had previously been offered by Freud and by Behaviourists. Basically, the approach offers an important counterbalance to the more deterministic approaches that have tended to dominate Psychology for most of the 20th century. However, it too has its drawbacks:

- (a) The terminology is not clearly defined and is therefore (like psychoanalysis) very difficult to test (note, however: there is a measure of self-actualisation called the Personal Orientation Inventory - Shostrom et al, 1976).
- (b) Client-centred therapy advocated by Rogers seems to be somewhat culture (maybe even class-bound). It appears to work best with articulate people who are motivated to seek help. Those who are withdrawn, inarticulate or seriously disturbed need some other kind of help to sort out their problems.
- (c) The values that Humanistic Psychologists support have also been criticised. There seems to be too much emphasis on the well-being of the individual and the treatment of the individual at the expense of concern for the welfare of others

(Wallach & Wallach, 1983). There is also a feminist criticism about the Humanist's emphasis on personal change: Nye (1984) suggests that this is a patriarchal attitude, suggesting that it is the person that needs to change rather than the situation. In the case of the situation of women, the notion that they need to change rather than the situation and attitudes around them could be quite damaging.

To summarise, it seems that there is no one approach that can account fully for all aspects of human behaviour. Each focuses on a different aspect of human behaviour and experience and so should, perhaps, be seen as complementing each other rather than being in direct conflict. Many Psychologists working in the applied field tend to use a combination of different approaches, depending on the person or situation they are dealing with. Psychology is still a relatively new discipline and, as we have already discussed a number of times, has no clear paradigm about the nature of human beings. You could see it as a subject that can be looked at on a number of different levels:

- You could **reduce** a behaviour to a series of neural, hormonal and muscular activities. For example, you could say that a person is aggressive because they have a high level of a particular hormone or hyperactivity of a neurotransmitter which makes them behave in an aggressive way.
- You could take that same behaviour and say that it occurred as a result of previously **conditioned responses**, triggered by appropriate stimuli. For example, you could say that a person is aggressive because they have been reinforced for aggressive responses in the past and will therefore be likely to behave aggressively in the future.
- You could then go on to discuss the **thought processes** involved in that behaviour. You could say that the person is aggressive because the way they process information involves some misperceptions, misconceptions, irrational beliefs and that makes them aggressive.
- Next, you could try to find the **roots of the behaviour in the unconscious**. You could say that the person is aggressive because they have a strong id and a weak superego, therefore the ego allows expression of instinctual aggressive behaviour.
- Finally, you could discuss whether the behaviour occurred because of a **need for acceptance and approval by others**. You could say that the person is aggressive because their conditions of worth involve being dominant in order to gain approval and part of their idea of dominance is aggression, so they will behave aggressively.

*These explanations are not mutually exclusive. In terms of the approaches, which is which?*