

History and Approaches

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History of Psychology

One way to think about the history of psychology is to organize the various theorists and theories into “waves” (or schools of thought). Each wave is a way of thinking about human thought and behavior that dominated the field for a certain period of time until a new way of looking at psychology started to dominate the field.

Wave One—Introspection

Archaeologists and historians find evidence that humans have always thought about our thought and behavior, so in a way, the study of psychology is as old as our species. Archaeologists find evidence of *trephination*—Stone Age humans carving holes through the skull to release evil spirits. Greek philosophers such as *Plato* and *Democritus* theorized about the relationship between thought and behavior. However, thinking about psychology is different than studying it scientifically. Many psychologists specializing in the history of the science date the beginning of scientific psychology to the year 1879. In that year, *Wilhelm Wundt* (1832–1920) set up the first psychological laboratory in an apartment near the university at Leipzig, Germany. Wundt trained subjects in *introspection*—the subjects were asked to record accurately their cognitive reactions to simple stimuli. Through this process, Wundt hoped to examine basic cognitive structures. He eventually described his theory of *structuralism*—the idea that the mind operates by combining subjective emotions and objective sensations. In 1890, *William James* (1842–1910) published *The Principles of Psychology*, the science’s first textbook. James examined how these structures Wundt identified function in our lives (James’s theory is called *functionalism*). Introspective theories were important in establishing the science of psychology, but they do not significantly influence current psychological thinking.

Wave Two—Gestalt Psychology

While Wundt and James were experimenting with introspection, another group of early psychologists were explaining human thought and behavior in a very different

way. *Gestalt* psychologists like *Max Wertheimer* (1880–1943) argued against dividing human thought and behavior into discrete structures. *Gestalt* psychology tried to examine a person's total experience because the way we experience the world is more than just an accumulation of various perceptual experiences. Gestalt theorists demonstrated that the whole experience is often more than just the sum of the parts of the experience. A painting can be represented as rows and columns of points of color, but the experience of the painting is much more than that. Therapists later incorporated gestalt thinking by examining not just a client's difficulty but the context in which the difficulty occurs. Like the introspective theories, other than the contribution to specific forms of therapy and the study of perception, Gestalt psychology has relatively little influence on current psychology.

Wave Three—Psychoanalysis

If you ask someone to name a famous psychologist, he or she will most likely name *Sigmund Freud* (1856–1939). Freud revolutionized psychology with his psychoanalytic theory. While treating patients for various psychosomatic complaints, Freud believed he discovered the *unconscious mind*—a part of our mind over which we do not have conscious control that determines, in part, how we think and behave. Freud believed that this hidden part of ourselves builds up over the years through *repression*—the pushing down into the unconscious events and feelings that cause so much anxiety and tension that our conscious mind cannot deal with them. Freud believed that to understand human thought and behavior truly, we must examine the unconscious mind through dream analysis, word association, and other psychoanalytic therapy techniques. While many therapists still use some of Freud's basic ideas in helping clients, Freud has been criticized for being unscientific and creating unverifiable theories. Freud's theories were and are widely used by various artists. Many of Freud's terms moved from being exclusively used by psychologists to being used in day-to-day speech (for example, *defense mechanism*).

Wave Four—Behaviorism

John Watson (1878–1958) studied the pioneering conditioning experiments of *Ivan Pavlov* (1849–1936). Watson then declared that for psychology to be considered a science, it must limit itself to observable phenomena, not unobservable concepts like the unconscious mind. Watson along with others wanted to establish *behaviorism* as the dominant paradigm of psychology. Behaviorists maintain that psychologists should look at only behavior and causes of behavior—*stimuli* (environmental events) and *responses* (physical reactions)—and not concern themselves with describing elements of consciousness. Another behaviorist, *B. F. Skinner* (1904–1990), expanded the basic ideas of behaviorism to include the idea of *reinforcement*—environmental stimuli that either encourage or discourage certain responses. Skinner's intellectual influence lasted for decades. Behaviorism was the dominant school of thought in psychology from the 1920s through the 1960s.

Wave Five—Multiple Perspectives

Currently, there is no one way of thinking about human thought and behavior that all or even most psychologists share. Many psychologists describe themselves as *eclectic*—drawing from multiple perspectives. As psychology develops in the new century, perhaps one way of thinking will become dominant. For now, though, psychologists look at thought and behavior from multiple perspectives.

Psychological Perspectives

As described in the section about the history of psychology, different contemporary psychologists look at human thought and behavior from different perspectives. Contemporary perspectives can be placed into seven broad categories.

Humanist Perspective

Partially in reaction to the perceived reductionism of the behaviorists, some psychologists tried to describe some mysterious aspects of consciousness again. The *humanists*, including theorists *Abraham Maslow* (1908–1970) and *Carl Rogers* (1902–1987), stressed individual choice and free will. This contrasts with the *deterministic* behaviorists, who theorized that all behaviors are caused by past conditioning. *Humanists* believe that we choose most of our behaviors and these choices are guided by physiological, emotional, or spiritual needs. A humanistic psychologist might explain that an introverted person may choose to limit social contact with others because he or she finds that social needs are better satisfied by contact with a few close friends rather than large groups. Humanistic theories are not easily tested by the scientific method. Some psychological historians view it as more of a historical perspective than a current one. However, some therapists find humanistic ideas helpful in aiding clients to overcome obstacles in their lives.

Psychoanalytic Perspective

The *psychoanalytic* perspective, as described previously, continues to be a part, if a controversial one, of modern psychology. Psychologists using this perspective believe that the *unconscious* mind—a part of our mind that we do not have conscious control over or access to—controls much of our thought and action. Psychoanalysts would look for impulses or memories pushed into the unconscious mind through *repression*. This perspective thinks that to understand human thought and behavior, we must examine our *unconscious* mind through dream analysis, word association, and other psychoanalytic therapy techniques. A psychoanalytic psychologist might explain that an introverted person avoids social situations because of a repressed memory of trauma in childhood involving a social situation, perhaps acute embarrassment or anxiety experienced (but not consciously remembered) at school or a party.

Biopsychology (or Neuroscience) Perspective

Biopsychologists explain human thought and behavior strictly in terms of biological processes. Human *cognition* and reactions might be caused by effects of our *genes*, *hormones*, and *neurotransmitters* in the brain or by a combination of all three. A biopsychologist might explain a person's tendency to be *extroverted* as caused by genes inherited from their parents and the genes' effects on the abundance of certain neurotransmitters in the brain. Biopsychology is a rapidly growing field. Some scientists wonder if the future of psychology might be a branch of the science of biology. (Also see the chapter "Biological Bases of Behavior.")

Evolutionary (or Darwinian) Perspective

Evolutionary psychologists (also sometimes called *sociobiologists*) examine human thoughts and actions in terms of *natural selection*. Some psychological traits might be advantageous for survival, and these traits would be passed down from the parents to the next generation. A psychologist using the evolutionary perspective might explain a person's tendency to be extroverted as a survival advantage. If a person is outgoing, he or she might make friends and allies. These connections could improve the individual's chances of survival, which increases the person's chances for passing this trait for extroversion down to his or her children. The Evolutionary Perspective is similar to (and in some ways a subset of) the Biopsychology Perspective.

Behavioral Perspective

Behaviorists explain human thought and behavior in terms of *conditioning*. Behaviorists look strictly at observable behaviors and what reaction organisms get in response to specific behaviors. A behaviorist might explain a person's tendency to be extroverted in terms of reward and punishment. Was the person rewarded for being outgoing? Was the person punished for withdrawing from a situation or not interacting with others? A behaviorist would look for environmental conditions that caused an extroverted response in the person (see also the "Learning" chapter).

Cognitive Perspective

Cognitive psychologists examine human thought and behavior in terms of how we interpret, process, and remember environmental events. In this perspective, the rules that we use to view the world are important to understanding why we think and behave the way we do. A cognitive psychologist might explain a person's tendency to be extroverted in terms of how he or she interprets social situations. Does the individual interpret others' offers for conversation as important ways to get to know someone or important for his or her own life in some way? To a cognitive psychologist, an extroverted person sees the world in such a way that being outgoing makes sense.

Social-Cultural (or Sociocultural) Perspective

Social-cultural psychologists look at how our thoughts and behaviors vary from people living in other *cultures*. They emphasize the influence culture has on the way we think and act. A social-cultural psychologist might explain a person's tendency to be extroverted by examining his or her culture's rules about social interaction. How far apart do people in this culture usually stand when they have a conversation? How often do people touch each other while interacting? How much value does the culture place on being part of a group versus being an individual? These cultural norms would be important to a sociocultural psychologist in explaining a person's extroversion.

If you ask psychologists which of these perspectives they most agree with, they might say that each perspective has valid explanations depending on the specific situation. This point of view, sometimes called *eclectic*, claims that no one perspective has all the answers to the variety of human thought and behavior. Psychologists use various perspectives in their work depending on which point of view fits best with the explanation. In the future, some perspectives might be combined or new perspectives might emerge as research continues.

Practice Questions

Directions: Each of the questions or incomplete statements below is followed by five suggested answers or completions. Select the one that is best in each case.

1. You are at a lecture about the history of psychology and the speaker states that Wilhelm Wundt's theory of structuralism was the first scientific psychological theory. On what historical fact might the speaker be basing her or his argument?
 - (A) Wundt was internationally known at the time, and this lent credence to his theory in the scientific community.
 - (B) Wundt studied under Ivan Pavlov for his graduate training, and Pavlov required scientific methods to be used.
 - (C) Structuralism was based on the results of his introspection experiments, so it is, at least in part, empirical.
 - (D) Structuralism was based on careful anecdotes gathered from Wundt's extensive clinical career.
 - (E) Wundt was the first person to study psychology in an academic setting.
2. Sigmund Freud's theory of the unconscious mind
 - (A) was revolutionary because it was the first comprehensive explanation of human thought and behavior.
 - (B) resulted from discoveries about the human brain obtained by cadaver dissection.
 - (C) is outdated and has no relevance for modern psychology.
 - (D) focused entirely on human males' sex drive.
 - (E) depends on the idea that humans can remember events but not be consciously aware of the memory.
3. In what way might a behaviorist disagree with a cognitive psychologist about the cause of aggression?
 - (A) A behaviorist might state that aggression is caused by memories or ways we think about aggressive behavior, while a cognitive psychologist might say aggression is caused by a past repressed experience.
 - (B) A behaviorist might state that aggression is a behavior encouraged by our genetic code, while a cognitive psychologist might state that aggression is caused by memories or ways we think about aggressive behavior.
 - (C) A behaviorist might state that aggression is caused by past rewards for aggressive behavior, while a cognitive psychologist might believe aggression is caused by an expressed desire to fulfill certain life needs.
 - (D) A behaviorist might state that aggression is caused by past rewards for aggressive behavior, while a cognitive psychologist might believe aggression is caused by memories or ways we think about aggressive behavior.
 - (E) A behaviorist would not disagree with a cognitive psychologist about aggression because they both believe that aggressive behavior is caused by the way we cognitively process certain behaviors.

4. Dr. Marco explains to a client that his feelings of hostility toward a coworker are most likely caused by the way the client interprets the coworker's actions and the way he thinks that people should behave at work. Dr. Marco is most likely working from what perspective?
 - (A) behavioral
 - (B) cognitive
 - (C) psychoanalytic
 - (D) humanist
 - (E) social-cultural
5. The research methodology Wilhelm Wundt used is called
 - (A) introspection.
 - (B) structuralism.
 - (C) naturalistic observation.
 - (D) inferential.
 - (E) scientific.
6. Which of the following psychologists wrote the first psychology textbook?
 - (A) William James
 - (B) Wilhelm Wundt
 - (C) B. F. Skinner
 - (D) John Watson
 - (E) Albert Bandura
7. Which of the following psychologists was part of the Gestalt group of psychologists?
 - (A) Carl Rogers
 - (B) Wilhelm Wundt
 - (C) B. F. Skinner
 - (D) John Watson
 - (E) Max Wertheimer
8. Which of the following concepts is most integral to Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory?
 - (A) trephining
 - (B) structuralism
 - (C) the unconscious mind
 - (D) the concept of Gestalt
 - (E) behaviorism
9. Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory has been criticized for being
 - (A) appropriate for female patients, but not male patients.
 - (B) only applicable to research settings, not therapy settings.
 - (C) based on large groups, not individual cases.
 - (D) unscientific and unverifiable.
 - (E) too closely tied to behavioristic thought.

10. John Watson relied on the pioneering work of _____ in establishing behaviorism as a paradigm of psychology.
 - (A) B. F. Skinner
 - (B) Wilhelm Wundt
 - (C) William James
 - (D) Ivan Pavlov
 - (E) Sigmund Freud
11. B. F. Skinner introduced the idea of _____ to the paradigm of behaviorism.
 - (A) unconscious thinking
 - (B) reinforcement
 - (C) conditioning
 - (D) defense mechanisms
 - (E) introspection
12. Which of the following psychologists might have described himself as a humanist?
 - (A) B. F. Skinner
 - (B) William James
 - (C) Abraham Maslow
 - (D) John Watson
 - (E) Ivan Pavlov
13. Symbolic dream analysis might be an important research technique to a psychologist from which of the following perspectives?
 - (A) behaviorist
 - (B) biopsychologist
 - (C) psychoanalytic
 - (D) evolutionary
 - (E) structuralist
14. Behaviorists explain human thought and behavior as a result of
 - (A) past conditioning.
 - (B) unconscious behavioral impulses.
 - (C) natural selections.
 - (D) biological processes.
 - (E) individual choice.
15. A therapist who says that she uses whatever psychological perspective "works best" for each patient might be best described as
 - (A) social-cultural.
 - (B) humanist.
 - (C) eclectic.
 - (D) psychoanalytic.
 - (E) functionalist.

Answers to Practice Questions

1. (C) Scientific research is empirical by nature, and Wundt based the theory of structuralism on results of experimentation. Wundt's reputation and the academic setting are not relevant to the scientific nature of his theory. Wundt did not study under Pavlov nor was he a clinical psychologist.
2. (E) The unconscious mind contains memories of events or feelings of which we are not consciously aware. It was not the first comprehensive theory. Freud did not use cadaver dissection to formulate the theory. While the sex drive figures prominently in the theory, the theory is not focused entirely on sex. While some psychologists would dispute much of Freud's theory, many therapists still find the idea of the unconscious mind relevant.
3. (D) Behaviorists look at what behaviors we are rewarded for, and cognitive psychologists explain our behavior through the way we interpret events. The rest of the answers are explanations of other psychological perspectives incorrectly applied to behaviorism or cognitive theory.
4. (B) The cognitive perspective emphasizes the role of interpretation of others' actions and best fits the given scenario. The other perspectives would emphasize other types of explanations.
5. (A) Wundt used the technique of introspection to research his theory of structuralism. He did not use naturalistic observation and inferential and scientific are general terms that might be applied to many different types of research.
6. (A) William James wrote the first psychology textbook, *The Principles of Psychology*, in 1890.
7. (E) Wertheimer is the only psychologist in this list that was included as part of the Gestalt group in the text.
8. (C) The unconscious mind is an integral concept in Freudian theory. Memories and impulses are repressed into the unconscious mind and this drives our later behaviors. The other concepts mentioned do not relate to psychoanalytic theory.
9. (D) Freud did not use the scientific method and many of his conclusions cannot be tested. The theory was based on individual male and female cases in therapeutic settings, and is not tied closely to behaviorism.
10. (D) Watson referred to the conditioning experiments Ivan Pavlov did with dogs. B. F. Skinner came after Watson chronologically, and the other psychologists mentioned are not part of the behaviorist paradigm.
11. (B) Skinner added the idea of reinforcing events, such as rewards and punishments, to the basic idea of behaviorism. Unconscious thinking and defense mechanisms are concepts from the psychoanalytic perspective. Conditioning is a general term used before Skinner did his research. Introspection was a technique used by Wundt.
12. (C) Maslow is the only psychologist in this list included in the section on humanism in the text. Skinner, Pavlov, and Watson are behaviorists.
13. (C) The idea that dreams contain symbols is central to the psychoanalytic perspective, and not any of the other perspectives listed.
14. (A) Behaviorists explain human thought and behavior as a result of conditioning in our pasts, either classical conditioning or operant conditioning. This conditioning restricts (or eliminates) the idea of personal choice, and behaviorists do not usually refer to biological causes and evolutionary theory (like natural selection). The unconscious mind is a concept from psychoanalytic theory.

15. (C) The eclectic perspective claims that no one perspective can best explain all human behaviors and a therapist who works with many different perspectives to help individual patients is in some sense eclectic, not any of the other specific perspectives listed.