

## International Baccalaureate: Perspectives in Psychology

**ISSUES AND DEBATES IN PSYCHOLOGY**

There are five major approaches in Psychology:-

**Biological, Behaviourist, Cognitive, Psychoanalytic, Humanist**

Over the last few weeks you have learnt something about each of these approaches and at various points these approaches have been placed in the context of some of the major debates in psychology. We can sum up the major issues and debates that arise from these different approaches as follows:

- Freewill vs. Determinism**
- Reductionism vs. Non-reductionism**
- Structuralism vs. Functionalism**
- Nature vs. Nurture**
- Objectivity vs. Subjectivity**
- Nomothetic vs. Idiographic**

The main arguments of these debates are summarised in the following table:-

<b><i>Free will</i></b>	<b><i>Determinism</i></b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People have the ability to choose their own course of action, to determine their own lives - we have the freedom to choose (within certain limits)</li> <li>• People have responsibility for their actions - they are the cause of what they do</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Behaviour is determined by external events or stimuli or by internal, unconscious drives</li> <li>• People are passive responders - therefore we do not have freedom to choose</li> <li>• Behaviour occurs in a regular, orderly manner which is totally predictable (in principle)</li> </ul>
<b><i>Reductionism</i></b>	<b><i>Non-reductionism</i></b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Behaviour can be reduced to minute units of analysis such as stimulus-response connections, neuron activity, muscle movements and any larger units of analysis are pointless.</li> <li>• Explanations of complex wholes in terms of the units of which those “wholes” are composed are the only explanations that are worthwhile</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thorough knowledge of organisms cannot be gained through knowledge of nerve activity and muscle movement or through knowledge of stimulus-response connections.</li> <li>• There is a hierarchy of levels of explanation, from the sociological to the psychological down, eventually, to the physical and chemical. No one level can account for the whole of behaviour and all levels are needed for a complete explanation</li> <li>• A human cannot be reduced to stimulus-response connections. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.</li> </ul>
<b><i>Structuralism</i></b>	<b><i>Functionalism</i></b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Psychology should concern itself with the elementary processes of conscious experience.</li> <li>• The structure of consciousness and immediate mental experience can be broken down into basic elements</li> <li>• The elements of conscious experience are sensations and feelings</li> <li>• Introspection is a valid way to investigate conscious experience</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Behaviour should be studied in terms of its functional value (what the behaviour is for) in adapting the person or animal to its environment.</li> <li>• Based on Darwin’s ideas of evolution</li> <li>• Function of consciousness is to enable humans to behave in ways in which will aid survival through adaptation to the environment</li> </ul>

<b><i>Nature</i></b>	<b><i>Nurture</i></b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individuals are born with an inherited ‘blue-print’.</li> <li>• Behaviours that are not already present at birth will develop as though they were on a genetic time-switch (i.e. through the process of maturation)</li> <li>• The environment has little to do with individual development and there is little that anyone can do to change what nature has provided</li> <li>• Behaviour is not within our control</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The infant's mind at birth is “tabula rasa” (blank slate) and everything is learnt through experience</li> <li>• Changes in the environment produce changes in the individual</li> <li>• Within their physical limitations, anyone can become anything, providing the environment is right</li> <li>• Behaviour is within our control</li> </ul>
<b><i>Objectivity</i></b>	<b><i>Subjectivity</i></b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Data should be collected in a way that makes it quantifiable</li> <li>• Investigations should be objective, generalisable and accessible</li> <li>• The aim should be to have freedom from influences of experimenter's values, interests, expectations and prejudices.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Qualitative data gives richer and more valid data than quantitative data</li> <li>• Interpretation of data should be carried out by the researcher and may be a different interpretation to that proposed by others</li> <li>• Description is as valid as measurement</li> </ul>
<b><i>Nomothetic</i></b>	<b><i>Idiographic</i></b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Theories depend upon the scientific observation of a number of participants</li> <li>• Aim is to arrive at general principles or laws of behaviour which apply to <i>everybody</i></li> <li>• Individuality is not important</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research addresses the wholeness and uniqueness of the individual</li> <li>• Aim is to give a complete and in-depth picture of the individual</li> <li>• Generalisability and predictability of findings from research are not important</li> </ul>

Each of the main approaches we have discussed during this module can be placed in the context of at least one and usually more than one of these debates. These are listed, as follows:-

#### **Biological Approach**

Takes a physiological (and hence a generally **reductionist**) approach to Psychology. It includes the study of the contribution of evolution and genetic inheritance to our behaviour. It also has a **functionalist, objective, nomothetic, nativist, determinist** stance.

#### **Behaviourist Approach**

This approach suggests that the only valid data in Psychology is observable behaviour. Another assumption is that a person begins life “tabula rasa” and must learn everything. It also assumes that mechanisms of learning are identical for all species. This approach takes the following stance:

- determinist** - behaviour is determined by the environment according to Skinner
- reductionist** - behaviour can be reduced to S-R associations
- nurturist** - behaviour is learnt
- objectivist** - the only data worth having is objective) stance.

### **Cognitive Approach**

Looks at all aspect of intelligent behaviour (including perception, attention, memory, thinking, problem solving to computer models of thinking) from an information processing point of view. Reintroduces the idea of thinking being as important as observable behaviour, but uses scientific methodology rather than a subjective basis for its research. This approach takes the following stance:

- partially **reductionist** - artificial intelligence takes a reductionist viewpoint, as do some information processing models; however, many other aspects of cognitive psychology are non-reductionist
- structuralist** - many aspects of cognitive psychology are talk about structures being developed, describing what things do rather than what they are for
- nativist and nurturist** - both aspects can be found in cognition, though many cognitive Psychologists would go for the interactionist viewpoint
- objectivist** - most phenomena in cognitive Psychology are studied in an objective, scientific manner, subjectivity is frowned upon in cognitive circles.

### **Psychoanalytic Approach**

This is one of the person-centred approaches in Psychology (the other major one being humanism) which is heavily deterministic and emphasises development aspects of the person and their major influence on subsequent behaviour. It is an approach that focuses on the importance of the unconscious and the development of personality, the major motivator being conflict. It takes the following stance:

- determinist** - one of Freud's assumptions was psychological determinism, which suggests that nothing we ever do is accidental
- nature and nurture** - Freud suggests there is an interaction between our instinctual impulses and behaviour subsequently learnt
- subjectivist** - almost all the evidence gathered about this perspective was based on subjective reports; objectivity was not considered to be of paramount importance
- idiographic** - Freud takes an idiographic viewpoint, unlike someone like Eysenck who suggests personality can be boiled down to a few universal types

### **Humanistic Approach**

This approach looks at behaviour from an individual, uniquely human point of view. It treats each person as an individual and emphasises the capacity to grown and change through person-centred therapy. It takes a the following stance:

- free-will** - the notion is that we all have the power of personal agency and can grown and change if we want to; it rejects the deterministic viewpoint of the biological and psychoanalytical approaches
- non-reductionist** - it rejects the notion that the person can be reduced to S-R units or biological foundations
- subjectivist** - it suggests that objectivity is a wasted search and that subjective data is all that matters