

A-Level Psychology: The Six Key Approaches

There are six main viewpoints in psychology. Each one explains behaviour in a different way, focusing on a different reason for why people act how they do.

1. Biological Approach 🧬🧠

Main Idea: Human behaviour and mental processes are deeply influenced by biological systems, including genetics, brain structures, neurochemicals, hormones, and evolutionary factors.

Key Concepts:

- Genetics: Traits like intelligence, personality, and mental health can be inherited from your parents and often run in families. E.g. OCD is linked to the SERT gene and Gene 9
- Brain Structures: Different areas of the brain affect behaviour: The mind lives in the **brain**, so thoughts/behaviour have a physical basis, **e.g.** frontal lobes are involved in decisions and mood. Brain damage, e.g. from injury, can affect behaviour.
- Neurochemistry: Chemicals in the brain affect your mood and behaviour, e.g. low levels of serotonin are linked to OCD and depression while dopamine is involved in schizophrenia.
- Evolution: – genetically determined behaviours that enhance chance of survival (natural selection) and reproduction (sexual selection) are naturally selected for (Darwin, 1859).— like fearing spiders or craving sweet foods 💎.
- Research Methods: Brain scans and twin studies help us see how biology shapes behaviour.

Real-Life Example:

Taking antidepressants is like tuning a guitar — fixing the brain's "chemical imbalance" to bring you back in harmony.

2. Behaviourist Approach 🧑🎓

Main Idea: Behaviour is learned through direct experience (interaction with the environment). Behaviourists focus on what can be observed and say animals can be used as experimental subjects in place of people. Behaviour is a result of stimulus-response units.

Key Concepts:

- Classical Conditioning: Pavlov's dogs drooled at a bell because they associated it with food.
- Operant Conditioning: Rewards like extra screen time encourage behaviour chosen by parents, while punishments like no phone time discourage other behaviours. We learn as a result of consequences.

Real-Life Example:

Training your dog to sit with treats? You're a mini-Skinner! Or when teachers give you stickers for good work — positive reinforcement in action.

3. Social Learning Theory (SLT) 👁️👂

Main Idea: We learn by watching and copying *others*, especially people we look up to (role models). This means learning is 'indirect'.

Key Concepts:

- Identification: We are more likely to copy people who we see ourselves as similar too and admire / like.
- Vicarious Reinforcement: We are influenced by the consequences of behaviour that we see, e.g. seeing your friend get praised and get laughs for a joke makes you want to try being funny, as you are being (indirectly) rewarded too.
- Mediational Processes (what goes on in your head) determines whether you copy the behaviour, eg. Paying attention, remembering, believing you are able to copy, and wanting to do so are all important.

Real-Life Example:

Bandura's kids punched a Bobo doll after watching adults do it — like when you try stunts you saw online (sometimes with less success!).

4. Psychodynamic Approach 🧩 🚪

Main Idea: Behaviour is driven by unconscious conflicts and childhood experiences.

Key Concepts:

- Unconscious Mind: Hidden thoughts and feelings influence what you do, even if you don't realise it.
- Personality: The personality is made up of an interaction between three aspects. The id wants instant pleasure, e.g. snacks 🍪, the ego tries to keep things reasonable, and the superego is your conscience.
- Defence Mechanisms: We use unconscious strategies to help us deal with problems in our life. E.g. You get yelled at by your teacher, but can't take it out on them—so you slam your bedroom door instead. That's displacement: redirecting your anger from the real source to something safer.
- Psychosexual Stages: Personality develops through childhood stages linked to pleasure zones; unresolved issues can cause quirks in adulthood. Adult issues result from childhood experience.

Real-Life Example:

If you're super neat and organised, Freud might say you got stuck in the "anal" stage of the psychosexual stages — maybe your parents were strict about toilet training!

5. Humanistic Approach 🌱 ✨

Main Idea: People have free will and want to grow into their best selves.

Key Concepts:

- Free Will: You choose your own path — we're not just a puppet on strings.
- Self-Actualisation: Like unlocking the final level in a game, reaching your full potential feels amazing. It is the peak of Maslow's hierarchy and everyone's ultimate aim.
- Maslow's Hierarchy: this is a motivational theory that says you can't focus on being your best self if you're hungry or unsafe — basic needs come first.
- Congruence: Feeling happy when who you are matches who you want to be.
- Unconditional Positive Regard: Being accepted and loved, even when you mess up (yes, even if you forget to take out the bins).

Real-Life Example:

A great coach supports you no matter what — humanistic therapy works the same way, encouraging growth through acceptance.

6. Cognitive Approach 🧩 🖥️

Main Idea: Our thoughts and mental processes shape human behaviour.

Key Concepts:

- Information Processing: Our mind is like a computer, your brain takes input, processes info, then outputs a reaction (behaviour).
- Schemas: We have a picture in our head about different aspects of the world. We use these to make mental shortcuts that help you quickly understand the world — but sometimes they cause mistakes.
- Mental Processes: Memory, attention, language, and problem-solving all affect how you behave.

Real-Life Example:

Lost your phone again? Your brain's "search" function might be glitching — time to reboot with a snack and a break.

Other useful sources include: <https://www.simplypsychology.org/a-level-approaches.html>

<https://www.tutor2u.net/psychology/collections/a-level-psychology-study-notes-approaches-and-biological-psychology>

Application of approaches: task

Once you have summarised the six main approaches in psychology you need to research a famous character/criminal. Place a picture of the individual in the middle square and a brief description of their behaviour. Then complete the boxes to explain the individual's behaviour from each of the approaches.

Behaviourist approach – what behaviour of theirs has been rewarded or punished?

Social learning theory – what role models have they been exposed to – what behaviour might they have copied?

Cognitive approach – what irrational thoughts might they have had?

Biological approach – what hormones/neurotransmitters might influence their behaviour?

Description of behaviour

Psychodynamic approach – did any traumatic event occur in childhood?

Humanistic approach – what was motivating their behaviour?