Perspectives in Modern Psychology
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At a Glance
• There are many different ways of thinking about human behavior. Psychologists utilize a variety of perspectives when studying how people think, feel, and behave.

• Some researchers focus on one specific perspective, such as the biological perspective, while others take a more eclectic approach that incorporates multiple points of view.

• There is no single perspective that is "better" than another; each simply emphasizes different aspects of human behavior.

Seven Major Perspectives in Psychology
The early years of psychology were marked by the domination of a succession of different schools of thought. If you have ever taken a psychology course in school, you probably remember learning about these different schools which included structuralism, functionalism, psychoanalysis, behaviorism, and humanism. As psychology has grown, so has the number and variety of topics that psychologists investigate. Since the early 1960s, the field of psychology has flourished at a rapid pace, and so has the depth and breadth of subjects studied by psychologists.

Today, few psychologists identify their outlook according to a particular school of thought. While you may still find some pure behaviorists or psychoanalysts, the majority of psychologists instead categorize their work according to their specialty area and perspective.

Every topic in psychology can be looked at in a number of different ways. For example, let's consider the subject of aggression. Someone who emphasizes a biological perspective would look at the how the brain and nervous system impact aggressive behavior. A professional who stresses a behavioral perspective would look at how environmental variables reinforce aggressive actions. Another psychologist who utilizes a cross-cultural approach might consider how cultural and social influences contribute to aggressive or violent behaviors.

The following are just a few of the major perspectives in modern psychology.

The Psychodynamic Perspective
The psychodynamic perspective originated with the work of Sigmund Freud. This view of psychology and human behavior emphasizes the role of the unconscious mind, early childhood experiences, and interpersonal relationships to explain human behavior and to treat people suffering from mental illnesses.

The Behavioral Perspective
Behavioral psychology is a perspective that focuses on learned behaviors. Behaviorism differed from many other perspectives because instead of emphasizing internal states, it focused solely on observable behaviors.

While this school of thought dominated psychology early in the twentieth century, it began to lose its hold during the 1950s. Today, the behavioral perspective is still concerned with how behaviors are learned and reinforced. Behavioral principles are often applied in mental health settings, where therapists and counselors use these techniques to explain and treat a variety of illnesses.
The Cognitive Perspective
During the 1960s, a new perspective known as cognitive psychology began to take hold. This area of psychology focuses on mental processes such as memory, thinking, problem solving, language and decision-making. Influenced by psychologists such as Jean Piaget and Albert Bandura, this perspective has grown tremendously in recent decades. Cognitive psychologists often utilize an information-processing model, comparing the human mind to a computer, to conceptualize how information is acquired, processed, stored, and utilized.

The Biological Perspective
The study of physiology played a major role in the development of psychology as a separate science. Today, this perspective is known as biological psychology. Sometimes referred to as biopsychology or physiological psychology, this point of view emphasizes the physical and biological bases of behavior. Researchers who take a biological perspective on psychology might look at how genetics influence different behaviors or how damage to specific areas of the brain influence behavior and personality. Things like the nervous system, genetics, the brain, the immune system, and the endocrine systems are just a few of the subjects that interest biological psychologists. This perspective has grown significantly over the last few decades, especially with advances in our ability to explore and understand the human brain and nervous system. Tools such as MRI scans and PET scans allow researchers to look at the brain under a variety of conditions. Scientists can now look at the effects of brain damage, drugs, and disease in ways that were simply not possible in the past.

Biopsychology
• This area of psychology is known by a number of titles including behavioral neuroscience, psychobiology, and neuropsychology.
• Biopsychologists study the relationship between the brain and behavior, such as how the brain and nervous system impact our thoughts, feeling, and moods.
• This field can be thought of as a combination of basic psychology and neuroscience.

The Cross-Cultural Perspective
Cross-cultural psychology is a fairly new perspective that has grown significantly over the last twenty years. These psychologists and researchers look at human behavior across different cultures. By looking at these differences, we can learn more about how our culture influences our thinking and behavior.

For example, researchers have looked at how social behaviors differ in individualistic and collectivistic cultures. In individualistic cultures, such as the U.S., people tend to exert less effort when they are part of a group, a phenomenon known as social loafing. In collectivistic cultures such as China, however, people tend to work harder when they are part of a group.

The Evolutionary Perspective
Evolutionary psychology is focused on the study of how evolution explains physiological processes. Psychologists and researchers take the basic principles of evolution, including natural selection, and apply them to psychological phenomena. This perspective suggests that these mental processes exist because they serve an evolutionary purpose – they aid in survival and reproduction.
The Humanistic Perspective
During the 1950s, a school of thought known as humanistic psychology emerged. Influenced greatly by the work of prominent humanists such as Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow, this perspective emphasizes the role of motivation on thought and behavior.

Concepts such as self-actualization are an essential part of this perspective. Those who take the humanist perspective focus on the ways that human beings are driven to grow, change, and develop their personal potential. Positive psychology is one relatively recent movement in psychology that has its roots in the humanist perspective.

Final Thoughts
There are many different ways to think about human thought and behavior. The many perspectives in modern psychology provide researchers and students a way to approach different problems and find new ways to explain and predict human behavior as well as develop new treatment approaches for problem behaviors.