Psychologists have differing views about what creates behaviour. This has led to the evolution of several approaches to understanding behaviour, differing from each other in their basic assumptions, methods and theories. There are four widely accepted major schools of thought in Psychology, consisting of: Psychoanalytic, Behaviourist, Cognitive and Biological.

Psychoanalytic Approach

The psychoanalytic school of thought focuses primarily on the impact of the unconscious mind on behaviour. In other words, this suggests that our experiences, memories, repressed feelings and past trauma could potentially play a role in influencing our actions. The ‘father of psychoanalysis’ Sigmund Freud, was undoubtably a key figure in its development. Born in Czech Republic in 1856, Freud’s main inspiration behind choosing a scientific career was Charles Darwin. Jean-Martin Charcot and Wilhelm Fliess were also influential on helping Freud develop his approach.

One of Freud’s main contributions to psychology was his responsibility of popularising the idea of the conscious and unconscious mind. Freud used the analogy of an iceberg to convey the three levels of the mind: the conscious (the small amount of mental activity we are aware of), the preconscious (things we could be aware of if we wanted to), and the unconscious (things we are unaware of and cannot become aware of). The conscious comprises of thoughts and perceptions, while the preconscious consists of memories and stored knowledge and finally the unconscious regarding such things as fears, unacceptable sexual desires, violent motives, selfish needs, immoral urges and traumatic experiences, etc.

Freud believed that the human psyche (personality) was composed of three elements (tripartite), developing at different stages in our lives: the id, the ego, and the superego. In Freud’s theory of the mind, the id is something we are born with. Based on pleasure principle, it refers to our instincts and demands immediate satisfaction. The ego is the second to emerge in our personality. It operates based on reality principle and balances the needs of the id and restricts the superego. Lastly, the superego emerges. Based on morality principle, it acts as an internal parent/teacher, forbidding the satisfactory needs of the id.

According to Freud, defence mechanisms are used by the ego to deal with arising conflicts and anxiety throughout our lives, working at an unconscious level. There are a wide range of defence mechanisms we might use including: repression (burying thoughts away that would usually result in guilt), denial (refusal to believe an event, blocking it from awareness and avoiding it altogether), displacement (redirection of drive energy from one individual to a substitute powerless target),