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History

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Key Takeaways

B.F. Skinner's work on operant conditioning showed how reinforcement and punishment shape behavior.

Sigmund Freud introduced talk therapy and highlighted the role of cultural differences in psychology.

Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development transformed how we understand children's intellectual growth.

Some of the most famous psychologists include figures like B.F. Skinner, Sigmund Freud, Ivan Pavlov, and others. These psychologists have shaped our understanding of human thought and behavior. The work of the most influential psychologists represents diverse schools of thought that influence modern psychology.

Pioneering Famous

The breadth and diversity of psychology is reflected in the work of the most known thinkers. ^[1] While each psychologist may have been part of an



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The list below provides a snapshot of the careers of famous psychologists and their most important contributions to the field. In one study published by the American Psychological Association, the most eminent psychologists of the 20th century included B.F. Skinner, Jean Piaget, Sigmund Freud, and Albert Bandura. ^[2]

While by no means exhaustive, the following list offers a glimpse of some of the major theoretical outlooks that have influenced not only psychology but also the broader culture.

B. F. Skinner

B.F. Skinner is one of history's most famous psychologists. He was a staunch advocate for [behaviorism](#), which made him a dominating force in psychology so much that he has been described as the most eminent psychologist of the 20th century. ^[3]

Important contributions include:

[Operant conditioning](#): According to Skinner, all learning results from conditioning processes involving [reinforcement](#) and [punishment](#). When a behavior is reinforced, it is more likely to occur again. If it is punished, it is less likely to occur again.

[Schedules of reinforcement](#): When reinforcement and punishment occur can influence the learning process, including the strength of the response.

Many therapy techniques based on behavior modification and token economies.

Jean Piaget

[Jean Piaget](#) shaped our understanding of childhood. His theory of [cognitive development](#) is one of the most famous psychologists in history.

Piaget suggested that children go through four key stages of intellectual

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and actions as they develop object permanence.

2. [Preoperational stage](#): Children use language and symbols to represent ideas but think in egocentric ways.
3. [Concrete operational stage](#): Kids learn through hands-on experience and develop the ability to think logically.
4. [Formal operational stage](#): Abstract, hypothetical thinking emerges in adolescence.

His work had a particularly significant impact on the understanding of children's intellectual growth. His research contributed to the growth of [developmental psychology](#), cognitive psychology, genetic epistemology, and education reform.

Albert Einstein once described Piaget's observations on children's intellectual growth and thought processes as a discovery "so simple only a genius could have thought of it."

Sigmund Freud

When people think of famous psychologists, their minds immediately go to [Sigmund Freud](#). While many of his theories were controversial, his work supported the belief that not all mental illnesses have physiological causes.

His important theories include:

[The unconscious mind](#): He believed that the unconscious mind contains unconscious desires, fears, and thoughts.
[Id, ego, and superego](#): He suggested that the mind is divided into three parts: the instinctual id, the rational ego, and the moral superego.
[Psychosexual states](#): He suggested that personality develops through childhood stages where the id, ego, and superego interact.

His theories and work also introduced the concept of psychological problems could be treated through talk therapy, which has had a significant impact on the treatment of mental illnesses.



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and behavior. His work contributed to our understanding of human development, personality, [clinical psychology](#), and [abnormal psychology](#).^[5]

Albert Bandura

[Albert Bandura's](#) work is considered part of the cognitive revolution in psychology that began in the late 1960s. Bandura's [social learning theory](#) stressed the importance of [observational learning](#), imitation, and modeling.^[6]

"Learning would be exceedingly laborious, not to mention hazardous, if people had to rely solely on the effects of their own actions to inform them what to do," Bandura explained in his 1977 book "Social Learning Theory."

Bandura's influence is still widely felt today as researchers continue to debate the effects of observed violence, such as in movies and video games, on adolescent behavior.

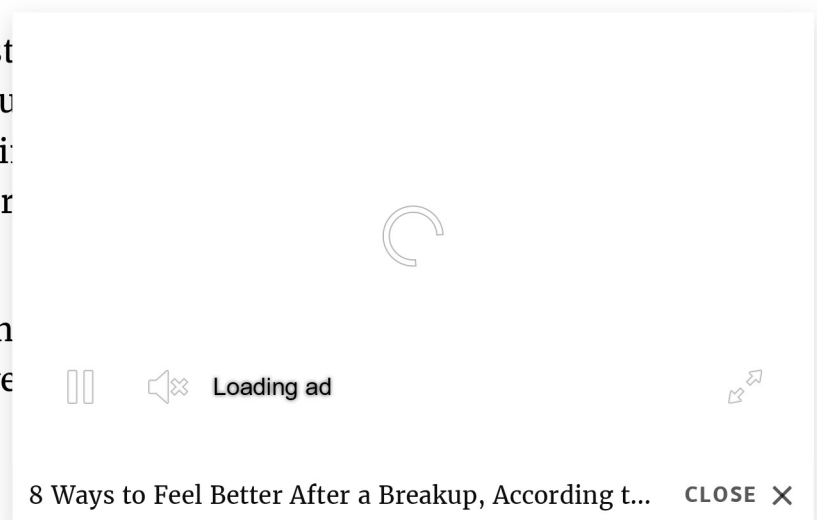
Ivan Pavlov

One of the individuals who is often regarded as one of the most famous psychologists wasn't actually a psychologist at all. Ivan Pavlov was a Russian physiologist whose research on conditioned reflexes and [classical conditioning](#) influenced the rise of behaviorism in psychology.^[7]

According to Pavlov, when a stimulus is paired with a conditioned stimulus, the natural response is triggered. Pairing a neutral stimulus with a conditioned stimulus triggering the same response.

Pavlov's experimental method involved the use of introspection and subjective measurement of behavior.

Carl Rogers





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potential and became a leading figure in the humanist movement in psychology. His approach emphasized empathy and self-awareness, particularly in [client-centered therapy](#).



Client-centered therapy is a non-directive approach to therapy in which the client guides the treatment process. This therapy is based on the idea that the client is an expert in their own life, so they are in the best position to decide what they need and how to achieve it. ^[8]

Famous Cognitive and Developmental Psychologists

Leon Festinger

Leon Festinger developed the theories of [cognitive dissonance](#) and social comparison to explain the ways in which social conditions influence human behavior.



Cognitive dissonance is the state of discomfort you feel when you hold two conflicting beliefs. For example, you may smoke even though you know it is bad for you.

His [social comparison theory](#) suggests that people compare their own beliefs and behaviors with those of other people who share your background and experiences.

Erik Erikson

Erik Erikson's stage theory of development over the lifespan. His theory, which is still popular today,



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An ego psychologist who studied with Anna Freud, Erikson expanded psychoanalytic theory by exploring development throughout the life cycle, including childhood, adulthood, and old age.

According to his theory, people progress through a series of eight life stages. At each stage, they face a developmental crisis, and successfully coping with that challenge can lead to the formation of qualities that affect future development.

Lev Vygotsky

[Lev Vygotsky](#) was a contemporary of some more famous psychologists, including Piaget, Freud, Skinner, and Pavlov, yet his work never achieved the same eminence during his lifetime. This is largely because much of his writing remained inaccessible to the Western world until quite recently.

[10]

His most influential theories include:

Zone of proximal development: The range between what a child can do alone and what they can achieve with guidance.

Scaffolding: Support that is provided by a more knowledgeable person, such as a teacher or peer, that is gradually removed as the person becomes more skilled.

More knowledgeable other: A person with greater skill or knowledge who helps the person learn and grow.

[Social constructivism](#): The idea that knowledge is created through interaction and collaboration.

Starting in the 1960s and through the 1980s, his work was translated from Russian. As a result, his theories became influential in recent decades, particularly in the fields of psychology and child development.

While his premature death at age 35 prevented him from achieving the fame he deserved, he has become one of the most frequently cited psychologists in the world.

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Famous Founding Figures

William James

Psychologist and philosopher [William James](#) is often referred to as the father of American psychology.

Early contributions: His teachings and writings helped establish psychology as a science. ^[11]

Influential textbook: Among his many accomplishments was the publication of the 1,200-page text "The Principles of Psychology," which quickly became a classic in the field.

In addition, James contributed to [functionalism](#) and pragmatism and influenced many students of psychology during his 35-year teaching career.

Wilhelm Wundt

Wilhelm Wundt established the world's first psychology lab in Leipzig, Germany, in 1879. He treated psychology as a scientific discipline distinct from philosophy and physiology and emphasized careful observation and experimental methods.

Key contributions include:

Establishing psychology as a separate science

Developing introspection as a method to study consciousness

Investigating key topics like perception, emotion

Influencing other psychologists in the U.S.

Famous Modern Psychologists

The 20th century was a time of the emergence of many founding figures. Psychology continued to evolve and new figures have emerged as significant

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motivation, cognition, social influence, and well-being. Some of these famous psychologists include:

Elizabeth Loftus: A leading memory researcher who has focused on [false memories](#) and the malleability of eyewitness testimony^[12]

Martin Seligman: A pioneer of [positive psychology](#), focusing on [learned helplessness](#), well-being, and resilience

Carol Dweck: Developed a theory suggesting that a person's [mindset](#), whether fixed or growth, influenced motivation and learning

Daniel Kahneman: A Nobel prize-winning researcher on topics like [heuristics](#), [cognitive biases](#), and decision-making

Angela Duckworth: Known for her research on grit and perseverance and how these qualities affect achievement and long-term success

Ellen Langer: Known for her influence on mindfulness^[13] and positive psychology as well as her research on the illusion of control

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Henry James (left) and William James (right)

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William James Biography and Impact on Psychology

Young woman lying on couch and

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