

# THE THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF COACHING



You mean this stuff wasn't just made up?

By Patrick Williams, EdD, MCC

**C**oaching is a new field that borrows from and builds upon theories and research from related fields that have come before it. It is a multidisciplinary, multi-theory synthesis and application of applied behavioral change.

Although coaching has a unique paradigm, much of what is useful in coaching goes back decades and even centuries. The attraction of pursuing personal development and exploring meaning, began with early Greek society. This is reflected in the famous quote by Socrates, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” Since then we have developed many ways of examining our lives. What persists, however, is that people who are not in pursuit of basic human needs such as food and shelter do begin to pay attention to higher needs such as self-actualization, finding fulfillment, and spiritual connection. In ancient Greece, as now, an intense desire to explore and find personal meaning can be observed.

## Contributions from psychology

There have been four major forces in psychological theory since the emergence of psychology in 1879 as a social science. These four forces are Freudian, Behavioral, Humanistic, and Transpersonal. In recent years there have been three other forces at work, which I

believe are really adaptations or evolutions of these four. Cognitive-Behavioral Psychology grew from a mix of the Behavioral and Humanistic schools. Positive Psychology utilizes Cognitive-Behavioral approaches and adds to the theories that Humanistic Psychology emphasizes: a non-mechanistic view, and a view of possibility as opposed to pathology as an essential approach to the client. And Ken Wilber’s Integral approaches to psychology and life are, I believe, a new labeling of what was called Transpersonal. Along with each revolution in psychology, a changing image of human nature has also evolved.

Psychology began as the investigation of consciousness and mental functions such as sensation and perception. Much of the early influence on psychology came from the philosophical tradition, and early psychologists adopted the practice of introspection used by philosophers.

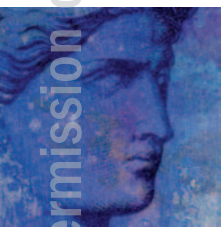
Introspectionists were an early force in psychology, with Wilhelm Wundt in Germany and Edward Titchener in America being two of the early defenders of introspection as a method of understanding the workings of the human mind. But they soon realized the inadequacies of introspection for the validation of the young science of psychology. Consciousness and mental functioning were difficult to study objectively. Psychology was experiencing growing pains then, much as coaching is today.

### Key theorists

What follows is a quick tour of the growth of psychology and how its major thinkers set the stage for the coaching revolution.

William James was the father of American psychology. James preferred ideas to laboratory results and is best known for his view that humans can experience higher states of consciousness. He wrote on such diverse topics as functions of the brain, perception of space, psychic and paranormal faculties, religious ecstasy, will, attention, and habit. Because of his orientation, he gradually drifted away from psychology and in his later life emphasized philosophy. Nevertheless, William James had a tremendous influence on the growth of the psychology profession, and he is still widely read today. One of his most historic books, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, is a treatise that offers as much today as it did yesterday in the areas of spirituality and transpersonal consciousness.

Sigmund Freud influenced the first force in psychology. While psychology in the United States was struggling for an identity and striving for recognition by the scientific community, European psychology was being reshaped by the theories of Sigmund Freud. Freud cre-



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ated quite a stir in the medical community with his ideas and theories, but he finally gained acceptance in psychiatry with the ‘talking cure’ breakthrough — psychoanalysis. Freud brought us such terms as unconscious, id, ego, and superego.

As Freudian thought was taking shape in Europe and the United States, William James and others began to focus on measurable behavior. Many American psychologists began to combat Freudian theories as another non-verifiable, subjective pseudo-science of the mind.

The time was ripe for the emergence of Behaviorism as the second major force in psychology, led by B. F. Skinner and John Watson. Hundreds of years previ-

ously, Shakespeare had commented, “What a piece of work is man?” The Behaviorists took this literally and looked upon humans in the early 20th century as *Homo mechanicus*, an object to be studied like any machine would be studied. *Homo mechanicus* was a machine whose mind was ignored.

In the 1950s, Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers initiated the third force in psychology, Humanistic Psychology. It focused on the personal, ontological, and phenomenological aspects of human experience, as opposed to the reductionist and mechanistic theories of Freudianism and Behaviorism.

Maslow eventually posited the fourth force, Transpersonal Psychology, which included mind, body, and spirit. It delved into altered states of consciousness as a way to explore the transpersonal realm. This research began to open up our knowledge of the human mind and expand our windows of perception and possibility.

### Other influences

A vast array of research into life-span developmental psychology has also created an understanding of developmental trajectories that can be very helpful to coaches. Daniel Levinson’s early work on the life development of Harvard graduates over their 50-year life span yielded great insight into men’s development within that age cohort (*Seasons of a Man’s Life*, 1978). Carol Gilligan’s work on girls and women created insight into the ways that women’s thinking and behavior differs from men’s over the life-span. Robert Kegan has created theories and methods for assessing the development of levels of consciousness in human life span development.

The hallmark of coaching is its synthesis of tools from other fields as well as its capacity for innovation. As the profession grows, it is developing a focused, research base of its own of what works within the unique paradigm that is coaching. •

For a brief historical review of scholarly theories, see [www.choice-online.com](http://www.choice-online.com) for a continuation of this article by Patrick Williams.

*Patrick Williams, EdD, MCC, is an ICF board member and CEO of the Institute for Life Coach Training.*