

FORMALISM

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Formalism in Psychological and Theoretical Frameworks

The Core Definition

Formalism, as a broad theoretical and methodological stance, is defined by its rigorous focus on the structure, organization, and intrinsic rules governing any given phenomenon, often explicitly opposing the analysis of subjective meaning or external context. In the realm of theoretical analysis, whether applied to art, literature, language, or psychological processes, Formalism asserts that the observable or inherent form--the "how" something is constructed--is the primary, and sometimes the only, valid object of study. This approach suggests that the significant explanatory power lies not in the creator's intent, historical background, or emotional effect, but solely within the autonomous system of relationships and patterns that constitute the object itself. This initial definition, which originated in literary and aesthetic theory, provided a powerful framework that was later adopted by various schools of thought in the social sciences, seeking objective rigor.

The fundamental mechanism behind the formalist principle involves the systematic detachment of the object of study from its environmental, historical, or biographical content. For instance, when analyzing a piece of communication, a formalist approach bypasses the emotional significance or the real-world implications of the message and instead concentrates on the grammatical rules, syntactical patterns, and phonological arrangements used to convey it. This emphasis on internal coherence and self-referential systems allows researchers to develop highly detailed, often mathematical or algorithmic models of underlying processes. By focusing on the invariance of the structure, researchers aim to uncover universal laws that dictate how phenomena are organized, thereby transforming interpretive analysis into a more objective, scientific endeavor suitable for fields like linguistics and Cognitive Science.

This commitment to form over subjective experience is a central tenet that distinguishes Formalism from approaches like Hermeneutics or Phenomenology. While other theories might prioritize the interpretation of lived experience or the subjective psychological state of the individual, Formalism deliberately brackets these elements. It treats the phenomenon--be it a behavior, a piece of text, or a cultural practice--as a self-contained system defined by its internal relations. This methodological purity is its greatest strength, as it promotes quantifiable analysis and rigorous classification, but it is also the source of its most frequent criticism, namely, the perceived reduction of complex human experience into abstract, sometimes sterile, schematic representations that ignore vital contextual information.

Historical Context and Development

The formalist tradition gained significant momentum in the early 20th century, notably with the rise of the Russian Formalists (such as Viktor Shklovsky and Roman Jakobson) starting around 1915, who revolutionized literary criticism by shifting focus from the author's biography and societal influences to the "literariness" of the text itself--the unique formal devices that make a text art. Simultaneously, in the field of linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure's work laid the groundwork for modern Structuralism, emphasizing the arbitrary yet systematic relationship between signs and the structured nature of language (the *langue*) over individual speech acts (the *parole*). These parallel movements provided the theoretical foundation for adopting formalist methodologies across the humanities and social sciences.

Although not always labeled explicitly as Formalism, similar principles permeated psychological thought during this period of seeking scientific legitimacy. Early experimental psychology, particularly the structural approach of Wilhelm Wundt and Edward Titchener, aimed to break down conscious experience into its most basic sensory elements and structures, mirroring a formalist desire to identify the fundamental components and rules of mental life. Later, the Gestalt psychologists, while reacting against elementism, were fundamentally formalist in their insistence that perception is organized according to innate structural laws (e.g., the laws of proximity and closure), asserting that the "form" or pattern of a perceptual whole is primary and irreducible to its parts. These developments signaled a broader intellectual trend toward recognizing the importance of underlying organizational principles.

In later decades, the most profound influence of Formalism on psychology emerged through Structuralism, especially as interpreted by anthropologists like Claude Lévi-Strauss, who applied formal linguistic models to analyze kinship systems, myths, and cultural practices. This era saw the structuralist perspective permeate developmental and cognitive psychology, suggesting that the human mind operates through universal, formal structures. The historical context thus demonstrates a clear trajectory: the initial focus on observable, systematic rules, whether in poetry or perception, became a critical tool for researchers attempting to map the underlying, invisible systems that govern human interaction and thought, prioritizing the logical architecture over the subjective expression.

A Practical Example: Analyzing Communication Structure

To illustrate the formalist approach, consider the analysis of a simple social interaction, such as a heated professional disagreement between two colleagues, Alex and Ben. A non-formalist (e.g., psychodynamic or contextual) approach would focus on the history of their relationship, their underlying emotional grievances, their personal intentions, or the corporate culture (the content

and context). In contrast, a purely formalist analysis of this event would completely disregard the subjective feelings and focus solely on the observable communication structures and rhetorical devices employed.

The formalist analysis proceeds by identifying the formal elements of the exchange. This involves focusing on the syntactic structure of the arguments, the types of speech acts used, and the quantifiable patterns of turn-taking and interruption.

Step 1: Identifying Formal Units. The analyst segregates the conversation into distinct communicative units (e.g., questions, assertions, commands, interruptions).

Step 2: Mapping Relational Rules. The focus shifts to how these units relate to each other irrespective of their semantic load. For instance, Alex uses an assertive statement followed by an immediate Ben-interruption 80% of the time, while Ben's assertions are followed by Alex's clarifying questions 95% of the time. These are structural patterns.

Step 3: Analyzing Rhetorical Devices (Form). The analyst notes the exclusive use of passive voice by Alex when discussing mistakes ("The report was lost") versus the exclusive use of active voice by Ben when assigning blame ("You lost the report"). The formalist is interested in the difference between the passive and active formal structure, not the reality of who lost the report or the emotional impact of the accusation.

Step 4: Defining the System. Based on these observations, the formalist concludes that the disagreement is characterized by an asymmetrical communication structure where one participant (Alex) consistently uses defensive, depersonalizing language forms, while the other (Ben) uses aggressive, personalizing language forms. The formalist describes this systematic imbalance in the communication architecture, offering a description of the structural pathology without needing to interpret the underlying psychological meaning or intent.

This step-by-step process reveals the underlying communication structure--the formal rules of engagement--which provides a highly objective description of the interaction. By abstracting the interaction into a set of quantifiable rules and patterns, the approach allows for comparison with other interactions and potentially the development of formalized, predictive models regarding conflict escalation, purely based on linguistic and interactional form.

Significance and Impact

The significance of Formalism to the broader field of psychology lies primarily in its contribution to methodological rigor and the pursuit of scientific objectivity. Before formalist principles were widely adopted, much of psychological inquiry relied heavily on introspection, subjective interpretation, or historical context, leading to challenges in replicability and generalizability. Formalism provided a necessary corrective, demanding that researchers define their objects of study in terms of observable, measurable, and systematic properties. This move was crucial for establishing

psychology as a natural science, particularly influencing the development of rigorous experimental design and statistical analysis which rely on formalized mathematical structure.

Its most enduring impact is evident in Cognitive Science and computational psychology. The very foundation of modern cognitive modeling is deeply formalist, treating the mind as an information-processing system defined by its operational rules, algorithms, and computational architectures. When researchers model memory retrieval or decision-making, they are primarily concerned with the formal logic of the process--the sequence of steps, the parameters of the algorithm, and the structure of the inputs and outputs--rather than the subjective experience of remembering or deciding. This formal approach has been indispensable for developing artificial intelligence and creating predictive models of human performance, demonstrating the practical power of analyzing form over content.

Furthermore, formalist analysis has practical applications in diverse fields such as human factors, education, and clinical psychology. In therapy, for example, formalist principles inform approaches that focus on identifying and restructuring dysfunctional behavioral or linguistic patterns (e.g., identifying the formal structure of a panic attack or the typical sequence of negative self-talk). In educational psychology, the analysis of learning relies on mapping the formal structure of knowledge domains (how concepts are hierarchically related) rather than simply assessing student interest or motivation. By providing tools for precise, systematic description, Formalism ensures that interventions and theories are grounded in clear, structural observations, thereby enhancing accountability and effectiveness in applied settings.

Connections and Relations

Formalism serves as a conceptual precursor and methodological backbone for several major psychological and theoretical movements, most notably Structuralism. While often used interchangeably, Formalism is typically the broader philosophical commitment to the primacy of form, whereas Structuralism is the specific application of formal principles, particularly derived from Saussurean linguistics, across cultural and social systems. Structuralism, therefore, is a formalized endeavor that seeks to uncover the deep, hidden rules (the "grammar") that generate surface-level phenomena, whether those phenomena are myths, social customs, or grammatical sentences.

Formalism also stands in direct contrast to Functionalism, which is another major theoretical current in psychology. While Formalism asks, "What are the intrinsic rules and structures of this system?" Functionalism asks, "What is the purpose or adaptive function of this behavior or mental state?" For example, a formalist analyzing emotion might map the neurological circuitry and chemical sequences (structure), while a functionalist would examine how that emotion aids survival or social cohesion (purpose). The difference highlights the formalist preference for internal, descriptive architecture over external, adaptive utility.

Finally, this theoretical approach belongs most broadly to the category of structural and theoretical psychology. It heavily influences linguistic psychology (e.g., the emphasis on syntax over semantics in early Chomskyan thought), systems theory, and the philosophy of science that prioritizes formal logic and mathematical modeling. While it may reject the subjective meaning of content, its methodological strength has undeniably shaped the way modern psychology approaches the study of complex human systems, demanding clarity in defining the organizational principles that govern behavior and cognition.

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