

Psychology

is the scientific study of the mind and behaviour. It is a multifaceted discipline and includes many sub-fields of study such as human development, sports, health, clinical, social behaviour and cognitive processes.

Psychology is really a very new science, with most advances happening over the past 150 years or so. However, its origins can be traced back to ancient Greece, 400 – 500 years BC, when philosophers used to discuss many topics now studied by modern psychology, such as memory, free will versus determinism, nature vs. nurture, attraction etc.

In the early days of psychology there were two dominant theoretical perspectives regarding how the brain worked, structuralism and functionalism.

Structuralism was the name given to the approach pioneered by Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1920), which focused on breaking down mental processes into the most basic components.

The term originated from Edward Titchener, an American psychologist who had been trained by Wundt. Wundt separated psychology from philosophy by analyzing the workings of the mind in a more structured way, with the emphasis being on objective measurement and control.

Structuralism relied on trained introspection, a research method whereby subjects related what was going on in their minds while performing a certain task.

However, introspection proved to be an unreliable method because there was too much individual variation in the experiences and reports of research subjects.

An American psychologist named William James (1842-1910) developed an approach which came to be known as **functionalism**. James argued that the mind is constantly changing and it is pointless to look for the structure of conscious experience. Rather, he proposed the focus should be on how and why an organism does something, i.e. the functions or purpose of the brain.

He suggested that psychologists should look for the underlying cause of behaviour and the mental processes involved. This emphasis on the causes and consequences of behaviour has influenced contemporary psychology.

Structuralism and functionalism have since been replaced by several dominant and influential approaches to psychology.

Psychoanalysis, founded by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) was the dominant approach in psychology during the early twentieth century. Freud believed that people could be cured by making conscious their unconscious thoughts and motivations, thus gaining insight.

Freud's psychoanalysis was the original psychodynamic theory, but the psychodynamic approach as a whole includes all theories that were based on his ideas, e.g., Jung (1964), Adler (1927) and Erikson (1950).

Behaviourism has been the classic contemporary perspective in psychology which adopted scientific strategies. The behaviourists were renowned for their reliance on controlled laboratory experiment and rejection of any unseen or unconscious forces as causes of behaviour.

Later, **the humanistic approach** became the 'third force' in psychology and proposed the importance of subjective experience and personal growth.

During the 1960s and 1970s psychology began a cognitive revolution, adopting **a scientific approach** with application to memory, perception, cognitive development, mental illness, and much more.

The Goals of Psychology

The four main goals of psychology are:

To Describe - Describing a behaviour or cognition can enable researchers to develop general laws of human behaviour.

To Explain - Once researchers have described general laws behaviour, the next step is to explain how or why this trend occurs.

To Predict - Psychology aims to be able to predict future behaviour from the findings of empirical research. If a prediction is not confirmed, then the explanation it is based on might need to be revised.

To Change - Once psychology has described, explained and made predictions about behaviour, changing or controlling behaviour can be attempted.