

Introduction to Psychology

Psychology incorporates the ideas and theories of many disciplines. History, philosophy, sociology, chemistry, biology and even mythology has had an impact on what we now know as psychology. Today, psychology is defined as "*the science of behavior and mental processes*" and in this course, the goal is that students develop a deeper understanding of these processes within themselves and a better appreciation for the similarities and differences that exist among us all.

It is important to understand the development of psychology to what it is today and a basic knowledge of the timeline is essential. Information on "Psychology's roots" can be found in the introductory sections of the Myers texts. The following is a general outline of development:

1. **Structuralism:** in the mid 1800's, Wilhelm Wundt took the approach that the subject matter of psychology was immediate experience and he focused on self-examination of one's inner feelings and thoughts. Wundt established the first formal psychology lab in Germany in 1879.
2. **Functionalism:** functionalists such as William James feel that psychology is more about the study of the mind as it functions in adapting the organism to its environment. James led the first American school of psychology in the late 1800's and published *Principles of Psychology* in 1890, one of the most widely used textbooks of that time.
3. **Gestalt Psychology:** founded in Germany by Max Wertheimer, Kurt Koffka and Wolfgang Kohler, those who follow this approach study psychology as the study of the immediate experience of the whole organism and argue that "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts" (see unit on "thinking and language" for a more detailed description of Gestaltism).
4. **Psychoanalysis:** Led by Sigmund Freud in the early 1900's, this approach focuses on the treatment of abnormal behavior with the belief that *unconscious* mental forces direct our everyday behavior (see unit on "personality" for more information).
5. **Behaviorism:** John Watson led this movement in the 1920's and focused on how behavior is *learned*. Ivan Pavlov was a behaviorist known for studying classical conditioning while B.F. Skinner, modern behaviorism's most important figure, studied operant conditioning (a detailed study of behaviorism will follow in the unit on "learning").

Today, this "science" is studied from a variety of perspectives. The following approaches frequently used:

1. **Neuroscience:** the study of how the nervous system works anatomically and biochemically. This is the most "medical" of perspectives and allows us to study disease, organic disorders and body function.
2. **Evolutionary psychology:** An approach in which one studies the importance of certain traits and behaviors in the *perpetuation of one's genes*.
3. **Behavior genetics:** these geneticists are interested in how our genetic make-up influences our behavior and our personality.
4. **Behavioral psychology:** the study of how personality and behavior is influenced by what we *learn* from the world around us.
5. **Cognitive psychology:** an approach that focuses on the study of thought processes such as how our memory works, how we reason and how we approach and solve problems.
6. **Social-cultural:** these psychologists study the effects of "the situation" and one's cultural environment and on behavior.

Today there are many psychology careers to be found in a variety of areas. Some areas of pursuit that one may consider are:

1. Social psychology
2. School psychology
3. Health psychology
4. Counseling (abuse, grief, marriage, family, addiction, ...)
5. Experimental psychology

6. Forensic psychology
7. Sports psychology
8. Rehabilitation
9. Psychiatry (medical degree required)
10. Neuroscience (research on brain biochemistry and disease)
11. Psychometrists (design and construct intelligence and personality tests)

When studying for this course it is important to keep in mind some of the main issues that will continue to appear in many units. In particular, themes such as "**stability versus change**" (are there areas of our behavior/personality/ability that we cannot change?), "**nature and nurture**" (are we born with it/ have we learned it) and the importance of "**scientific research**" in our understanding of psychology will continually be brought to focus. With respect to the latter, it is essential in your writings that any finding that you may cite be *supported by research*. This does not mean that you memorize every piece of research, the researchers involved and the year in which they occurred. It does mean however that you are able to describe what was carried out in a particular study. You will certainly need to know the more well-known research/theories by people such as Freud, Pavlov, Watson, Bandura, Skinner, Piaget, Kohlberg, Erikson, Rogers, Asch, and Milgram. **Do not be afraid**, you will come to know these people well. Good luck and good mental health!