

ORIGINS OF PSYCHOLOGY

THE SPECIFICATION SAYS...

Origins of psychology: Wundt, introspection and the emergence of psychology as a science.

The idea of psychology as a distinct branch of study in its own right is generally dated at around 1880 when the first experimental lab was established.

That said, the philosophical roots of psychology stretch back much earlier than this. We shall consider these early roots as well as chart the emergence of psychology as a scientific discipline.

KEY TERMS

Psychology – The scientific study of the human mind and its functions, especially those functions affecting behaviour in a given context.

Science – A means of acquiring knowledge through systematic and objective investigation. The aim is to discover general laws.

Introspection – The first systematic experimental attempt to study the mind by breaking up conscious awareness into basic structures of thoughts, images and sensations.

Psychology's early philosophical roots

Rene Descartes (1596–1650)

Descartes, a French philosopher, suggested that the mind and body are independent from each other – a philosophical stance that came to be known as **Cartesian dualism**. Although this view has since been challenged, it suggested that the mind could be an object of study in its own right. Descartes demonstrated his own existence with the famous quote 'I think therefore I am'.

John Locke (1632–1704)

Locke proposed **empiricism**, the idea that all experience can be obtained through the senses, and that human beings inherit neither knowledge nor instincts. This view would later form the basis of the **behaviourist approach** that the world can be understood by investigating external events that are observed and measured.

Charles Darwin (1809–1882)

Central to Darwin's **evolutionary theory** is the notion that all human and animal behaviour has changed over successive generations, so that the individuals with stronger, more **adaptive** genes survive and reproduce, and the individuals with weaker genes do not survive and reproduce. Thus, these weaker genes are 'weeded out' (**survival of the fittest**).

The assumption that many human behaviours, such as social behaviour, have evolved due to their adaptive value is deeply rooted in many areas of psychology, especially the **biological approach**.

Wundt and introspection

Wundt's lab

The first ever lab dedicated to psychological enquiry was opened by Wilhelm Wundt in Leipzig, Germany in 1879. The objective Wundt set himself was to document and describe the nature of human consciousness. This pioneering method came to be known as **introspection**, and involved Wundt and his co-workers recording their own conscious thoughts, with the aim of breaking these down into their constituent parts. Isolating the structure of consciousness in this way is called **structuralism**.

Controlled methods

This early attempt to investigate the mind might be regarded by many as naïve, but some of the methods and techniques Wundt and his co-workers used would nevertheless be recognised as 'scientific' today. All introspections were recorded under strictly controlled conditions using the same stimulus every time (such as a ticking metronome). The same **standardised instructions** were issued to all participants, and this allowed procedures to be repeated (**replicated**) every single time. Thus, Wundt's work was significant in that it marked the separation of the modern *scientific* psychology from its broader philosophical roots.

What we're gonna do right now is go back...back in time



17th century – 19th century

Psychology is a branch of the broader discipline of philosophy. If psychology has a definition during this time it is best understood as **experimental philosophy**.

1879

Wilhelm Wundt opens the first experimental psychology lab in Germany, and psychology emerges as a distinct discipline in its own right.

1900s

Sigmund Freud publishes *The interpretation of dreams*, and the **psychodynamic approach** is established. Freud emphasised the influence of the unconscious mind on behaviour, alongside development of his person-centred therapy: **psychoanalysis**. He argued that physical problems could be explained in terms of conflicts within the mind.

The emergence of psychology as a science

Watson and the early behaviourists

By the beginning of the 20th century, the scientific status and value of introspection was being questioned by many, most notably the behaviourist John B. Watson (1913). Watson's main problem with introspection was that it produced data that was subjective, in that it varied greatly from person to person, so it became very difficult to establish general principles. Watson was also highly critical of introspection's focus on 'private' mental processes and proposed that a truly scientific psychology should restrict itself only to studying phenomena that could be observed and measured. Thus, the behaviourist approach was born, and with it the emergence of psychology as a science.

Scientific approach

Watson (1913), and later Skinner (1953), brought the language, rigour and methods of the natural sciences into psychology. The behaviourist focus on the scientific processes involved in learning, alongside the use of carefully controlled **lab experiments**, would go on to dominate the discipline for the next five decades. The legacy of behaviourism can still be observed today. Many modern psychologists continue to rely on the **experimental method** as part of their research and practices. However, the scope of this research has broadened considerably since the behaviourists first studied learning in the lab. Following the cognitive revolution of the 1960s, the study of mental processes is now seen

as a legitimate and highly scientific area within psychology. Although mental processes remain 'private', cognitive psychologists are able to make inferences about how these work on the basis of lab tests. The biological approach also makes use of experimental data. Researchers within this area have taken advantage of recent advances in technology to investigate physiological processes as they happen, including live activity in the brain using sophisticated **scanning** techniques such as **fMRI** and **EEG**. Sufficient to say that, even though the scientific method is still a major cornerstone of psychology, it has come a long way since its early beginnings.

1913
John B. Watson writes *Psychology as the Behaviourist Views It* and **BF Skinner** establishes the **behaviourist approach**. The importance of self-determination and free will.

1950s
Carl Rogers and **Abraham Maslow** develop the **humanistic approach** – the so-called 'third force' in psychology, rejecting the views favoured by behaviourism and the psychodynamic approach that human behaviour was not determined by the individual. Humanistic psychologists emphasise the importance of self-determination and free will.

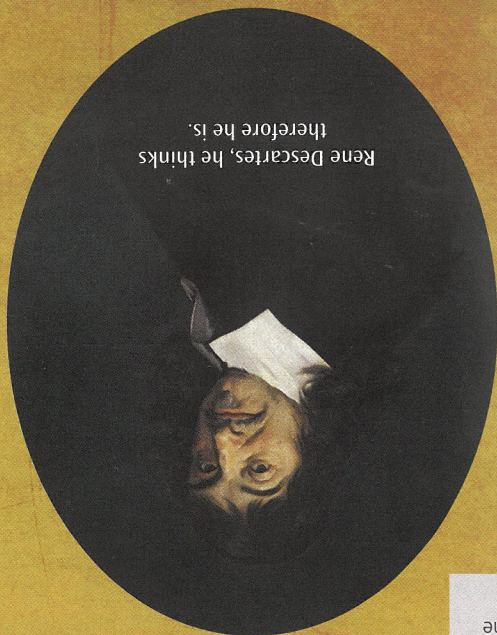
1960s
The cognitive revolution came with the introduction of the digital computer. This gave psychologists a metaphor for the operations of the human mind. **The cognitive approach** reintroduces the study of mental processes to psychology but in a much more scientific way than Wundt's earlier investigations.

1960s
Around the time of the cognitive revolution, **Albert Bandura** proposes the **social learning theory**. This approach draws attention to the role of cognitive factors in learning, providing a bridge between the newly established cognitive approach and traditional behaviourism.

1980s onwards
The **biological approach** begins to establish itself as the dominant scientific perspective in psychology. This is due to advances in technology that have led to increased understanding of the brain and biological processes.

Eve of the 21st century
Towards the end of the last century, **cognitive neuroscience** emerges as a distinct discipline bringing together the cognitive and biological approaches. Cognitive neuroscience is built on the earlier computer models and investigates how biological structures influence mental states.

Rene Descartes, he thinks therefore he is.



CHECK IT

1. Explain what Wundt meant by *introspection*. [3 marks]
2. Define what is meant by the term *psychology*. [2 marks]
3. Briefly explain the emergence of psychology as a science. [4 marks]

WHAT'S IN A WORD?

The word 'psychology' comes from the Greek word 'psyché' meaning 'mind' and the Greek word 'logos' meaning 'study of'. However, most modern psychologists might consider 'the study of the mind' too narrow a definition when describing the diverse and multidisciplinary nature of their work.