What is Psychology?

Psychology is the scientific study of the mind and behaviour, according to the American Psychological Association. Psychology is a multifaceted discipline and includes many sub-fields of study such areas 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. The emphasis was a philosophical one, with great thinkers such as Socrates (470 BC – 399 BC) influencing Plato (428/427 BC – 348/347 BC), who in turn influenced Aristotle (384 BC - 322 BC). Philosophers used to discuss many topics now studied by modern psychology, such as memory, free will vs determinism, nature vs. nurture, attraction etc.

The Beginnings of Psychology as a Discipline

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 intro the most basic components.

The term originated from Edward Titchener, an American psychologist who had been trained by Wundt. Wundt was important because he 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.

Despite the failure of introspection Wundt is an important figure in the history of psychology as he opened the first laboratory dedicated to psychology in 1879, and its opening is usually thought of as the beginning of modern experimental psychology.

An American psychologist named William James (1842-1910) developed an approach which came to be known as functionalism, that disagreed with the focus of Structuralism.

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.

James 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.

The Perspectives of Psychology

Structuralism and functionalism have since been replaced by several dominant and influential approaches to psychology, each one underpinned by a shared set of assumptions of what people are like, what is important to study and how to study it.

Psychoanalysis, founded by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) was the dominant paradigm 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).

The classic contemporary perspectives in psychology to adopt scientific strategies were the behaviourists, who were renowned for their reliance on controlled laboratory experiments 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 rigorous, scientific, lab-based 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, explain, predict and change the behaviour and mental processes of others

To Describe
Describing a behaviour or cognition is the first goal of psychology. This can enable researchers to develop general laws of human behaviour.

For example, through describing the response of dogs to various stimuli, Ivan Pavlov helped develop laws of learning known as classical conditioning theory.

To Explain
Once researchers have described general laws behaviour, the next step is to explain how or why this trend occurs. Psychologists will propose theories which can explain a behaviour.

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.

For example, classical conditioning predicts that if a person associates a negative outcome with a stimuli they may develop a phobia or aversion of the stimuli.

To Change

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

For example, interventions based on classical conditioning, such as systematic desensitization, have been used to treat people with anxiety disorders including phobias.

Source: Simply Psychology