

History of Structuralism & Functionalism

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll discuss the origins of psychology by looking at some important figures and key theories in the history of psychology.

The specific areas of focus include:

1. Structuralism
2. Functionalism

1. Structuralism

In 1879, **Wilhelm Wundt**, who is often referred to as “the father of psychology,” set up a laboratory in Leipzig, Germany, where he studied the conscious experience, and different reactions to stimuli.

He wanted to understand the behaviors and mental processes underlying the human experience.

Wundt is what we in the field of psychology refer to as a structuralist. As the word “structure” within the term implies, **structuralism** is a psychological theory which tries to determine the basic elements, or building blocks, of behavior and mental processes.

To compare it to the studies in another field of science, structuralism is like trying to find the atoms that make up different molecules.

Structuralism is an important philosophy because it helped to advance a lot of the key concepts in the field of psychology, such as the understanding of the brain's structure, how neurons constitute the entire brain and nervous system, and the basic personality types that help to construct a person as a whole.

All of these concepts will be discussed more in-depth in later lessons.



TERM TO KNOW

Structuralism

Theoretical perspective that mental phenomena can be broken down into basic parts



PEOPLE TO KNOW

2. Functionalism

Structuralism is one of two opposing philosophies; the second philosophy introduces another key figure in psychology.

William James was a student of Wundt's; he was also the first American to study psychology and bring it to the United States as a major area of study.

James is what we refer to as a functionalist. As opposed to structuralism, which tries to break down behavior and mental processes into their component parts, **functionalism** views the mental experience as more a stream, or a flow, of consciousness that is irreducible.

This means that according to functionalism, the mental experience can't be broken down any further. Another way of looking at it is that functionalism understands the evolutionary, or natural selection, of humans' mental experiences over time.

Because of this, much of functionalism informed the use of animals in psychological studies as a way of studying and understanding behavior.

Functionalism also informed the current areas of study in educational and industrial psychology, both of which will be discussed in greater detail as we move further through the course.



TERM TO KNOW

Functionalism

Perspective that mental processes cannot be broken down and instead are a steady flow of consciousness



PEOPLE TO KNOW

William James

A student of Wilhelm Wundt's, James was a functionalist and the first American to study psychology



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about two opposing theories at the foundation of psychology: **structuralism** and **functionalism**. Structuralism is the theoretical perspective that different mental phenomena can be broken down into their more basic component parts, and then studied in that way. Conversely, functionalism states that different mental processes cannot be broken down because they are a stream or a flow of consciousness.

You now understand how structuralism and functionalism differ, and that these two theoretical perspectives will inform further investigation into the different theoretical perspectives that you'll be seeing in future lessons.

Good luck!

Source: Adapted from Sophia tutorial by Erick Taggart.



TERMS TO KNOW

Functionalism

Perspective that mental processes cannot be broken down and instead are a steady flow of consciousness.

Structuralism

Theoretical perspective that mental phenomena can be broken down into basic parts.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Wilhelm Wundt

The father of psychology, Wundt was a structuralist who set up a research laboratory in Germany 1879

William James

A student of Wilhelm Wundt's, James was a functionalist and the first American to study psychology