

# Psychology 1A

## An Introduction to Psychology

Psychology: the scientific study of behaviour and mental processes

Goals of scientific psychology

- To describe behaviour using careful observations
- To predict whether a behaviour will or will not occur
- To identify the causes of behaviour
- To facilitate changes in behaviour e.g. therapy

The origin of psychology

- Emerged in part from philosophy
- However, it defined itself as an empirical science (based on systematic observation)
- Early assumption of the goal of psychology was to understand the structure and contents of the mind

Psychology and the brain

- The better the functional understanding of the psychological process, the easier to identify the neural mechanisms responsible for the various steps in that process

Milgram's studies of obedience to authority – factors affecting obedience to authority

- Perceived authority of the person giving the orders
- Presence of a contradicting authority
- Proximity of victim
- Level of direct responsibility

## Psychological Perspectives

Introspection

- “looking inwards” to examine one's own conscious experience
- Wundt trained observers to report on their experiences under different experimental conditions → failed → self-reports are unreliable
  - Experiments constituted to the development of theory

Structuralism

- Focused on the structure of consciousness
- Titchener argued that only experiments were useful

Functionalism

- Focused on identifying the rules/steps to which a task was achieved, not the underlying mechanism
- Consistent with the evolutionary framework
- James emphasised the analysis of psychological processes in terms of their function

## The Psychodynamic Perspective

### Psychodynamics

- Dynamic interplay of mental forces

### Psychoanalysis

- A challenge to introspection
- Freud argued that many psychological events are unconscious
  - Many of his theories were unsupported → lack of scientific grounding
- It is well established that many psychological processes proceed without full consciousness

## The Behaviourist Perspective

### Behaviourism

- A challenge to introspection
- Argued that subjective experience could not be verified by an objective observer
- Highly successful approach
- Watson discovered classical conditioning
- Skinner discovered operant conditioning

### Two variants

- Radical behaviorism
  - Only observable behaviour qualified as scientific
  - “internal states” not accepted
- Methodological/moderate behaviourism
  - Accepted “internal states” as long as they can be linked to observable behaviours
  - Underlies much of modern cognitive psychology and associative learning

## The Humanistic Perspective

### Characteristics

- Focus on phenomenology (uniqueness of individual)
- Belief in free will, meaning is important
- Personal growth

### Important theories

- Carl Rogers’ theory of personality
- Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of basic needs

### Criticisms

- Free will vs. determinism
- Poorly defined concepts
- Some unscientific methods used

## The Cognitive Perspective

### Characteristics

- Focuses on the way people perceive, process and retrieve information
- Metaphor of ‘the computer’ is often used

### Origins of the cognitive perspective

- Philosophical roots
- Studies include the way people form abstract concepts or categories

### Metaphors, methods and data of cognitive psychology

- (same as behaviourist) viewed organisms as machines that respond to environmental input with predictable output
- Filled the black box of the behaviourists

## The Evolutionary Perspective

### Characteristics

- Argued that behavioural tendencies in humans evolved
- (same as functionalists) believed that most enduring human attributes at some time served a function

### Origins of the evolutionary perspective

- Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection
- Adaptation is always relative to a specific environment

### Ethology, sociobiology and evolutionary psychology

- Ethology: studies animal behaviour from a biological and evolutionary perspective
  - Applied this sort of evolutionary approach to understanding animal behaviour
- Sociobiology (Wilson 1975): explores possible evolutionary and biological bases of human social behaviour
- Evolutionary psychology: evolutionary thinking applied to a wide range of psychological phenomena
  - Genetic transmission is not limited to physical traits

### Metaphors, methods and data of the evolutionary perspective

- Distinctive feature of evolutionary perspective – prediction of behaviour, rather than after-the-fact explanation
- Suggests a single and deceptively simple principle: we think, feel and behave in ways that helped our ancestors adapt to their environments, and hence to survive and produce

## Clinical Perspectives

### Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

- Affected about 10% of survivors, after a trauma

### Psychological debriefing

- For 30 years, a common response to PTSD
- Occurred within 48 hours of trauma exposure
- Required people to discuss their experience and emotional responses
- Intended to prevent PTSD
- However, does NOT work due to
  - Comparison condition required