The History of Psychology and What It Includes

Psychology is a broad discipline which seeks to analyze the human mind. Different disciplines within this field study why people behave, think, and feel the way they do. There are many different ways to approach psychology, from examining [biology](http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-biology.htm)'s role in mental health to the role of the environment on behavior. Some psychologists focus only on how the mind develops, while others counsel patients to help improve their daily lives.

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| The history of psychology dates back at least to 1879, when the German psychologist Wilhelm Wundt founded the first laboratory exclusively devoted to psychology. The most famous psychologist is perhaps Sigmund Freud, an Austrian who founded the field of [psychoanalysis](http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-psychoanalysis.htm). Although Freud's theories had a huge impact on a wide variety of areas, including literature and film, many of his ideas are considered subjective from a modern perspective. |

There are dozens of different sub-disciplines of psychology, with each taking a somewhat different approach to understanding the mind. Some sub-disciplines include social psychology, clinical psychology, occupational health, and cognitive psychology. It is important to note that, even within a particular field, there may be different approaches. Clinical psychology, for example, has four main schools: psychodynamic, humanistic, cognitive and behavioral, and systems therapy.

The field of psychology is far wider than the image of a patient reclining on a couch, talking to his therapist or a researcher studying a rat running through a [maze](http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-a-maze.htm). A forensic psychologist may help legal professionals investigate allegations of child abuse or evaluate a suspect's competency. A legal psychologist might act as an adviser to a judge or as a trial consultant. An industrial-organizational psychologist might work with a company to help hire the best applicants or help improve workplace morale. A sports psychologist might work one-on-one with a player to help overcome a performance barrier, or work with an entire team to help improve group cohesion.

Psychology should be further distinguished between *research psychology*, which seeks to establish facts about the mind by conducting experiments, and *applied psychology*, which seeks to help people with their problems. Some experiments have shown that the success rate for solving one's problems using only [psychotherapy](http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-psychotherapy.htm) — talking to a professional psychologist — is the same as talking to a close friend, so the efficacy of applied or clinical psychology as a discipline can sometimes be difficult to quantify. Alternatively, many patients report that therapy has been greatly helpful in their lives.

As compared to other hard sciences, like [physics](http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-physics.htm) and biology, some critics argue the field suffers from a lack of scientific rigor. The objectivity of tools like surveys, through which data is collected in some cases, are often questioned. This is perhaps closely associated with the complexity of the mind which we haven't quite been able to fully or substantially understand. Psychological studies, however, continue to be held in order to try to get a better understanding of the mind and how it works.

Fields like neuropsychology, which looks at how the structure of the brain affects mental health, use [neuroimaging](http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-neuroimaging.htm) technology. Tools such as functional magnetic resonance imaging ([fMRI](http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-fmri.htm)) and [positron](http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-a-positron.htm) emission [tomography](http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-tomography.htm) (PET) scans have assisted psychologists in making correlations between mental problems and biological states. For instance, in the 1980s, it was realized the [schizophrenia](http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-schizophrenia.htm) was mainly caused by biological factors rather than maternal neglect or some other environmental explanation.

**What Is Psychology?**

**Psychology** is the science of the mind and behavior. The word "psychology" comes from the Greek word *psyche* meaning "breath, spirit, soul", and the Greek word *logia* meaning the study of something. According to Medilexicon's medical dictionary, psychology is *"The profession (clinical psychology), scholarly discipline (academic psychology), and science (research psychology) concerned with the behavior of humans and animals, and related mental and physiologic processes."* Although psychology may also include the study of the mind and behavior of animals, in this article psychology refers mainly to humans.

**How do psychologists study the mind?** The mind is highly complex and enigmatic. Many wonder how psychologists can study such an intricate, seemingly abstract and extremely sophisticated thing. Even if scientists look inside the brain, as in an autopsy or during a surgical operation, all they see is gray matter (the brain). Thoughts, cognition, emotions, memories, dreams, perceptions, etc. cannot be seen physically, like a skin rash or heart defect. For a psychologist, human behavior is used as evidence - or at least an indication - of how the mind functions. We are unable to observe the mind directly; however, virtually all our actions, feelings and thoughts are influenced by the functioning of our minds. That is why human behavior is used as raw data for testing psychological theories on how the mind functions.

**Where does psychology lie compared to other sciences?** Many say that psychology lies at the crossroads of other disciplines, such as medicine, linguistics, sociology, biology, artificial intelligence, anthropology, sociology, and even history. For example, neuropsychology - which looks at how different brain areas are involved in memory, language, emotions, etc. - overlaps with biology and medicine.

**How many branches of psychology are there?** There are many branches of psychology; how you split them up will usually depend on which part of the world you are, even which university or institution you were trained at. The following are seen as the main branches of psychology:

* **Clinical psychology** - integrates science, theory, and practice in order to understand, predict and relieve maladjustment, disability, and discomfort. Clinical psychology also promotes adaption, adjustment and personal development. A clinical psychologist concentrates on the intellectual, emotional, biological, psychological, social, and behavioral aspects of human performance throughout a person's life, across varying cultures and socioeconomic levels. In other words, clinical psychology is the scientific study and application of psychology in order to understand, prevent, and alleviate psychologically-caused distress or dysfunction (disability) and promote the patient's well-being and personal development. Psychological assessment and psychotherapy are central to the practice of clinical psychology. However, clinical psychologists are often also involved in research, training, forensic testimony, and other areas.
* **Cognitive psychology** - this branch investigates internal mental processes, such as problem solving, memory, learning, and language (how people think, perceive, communicate, remember and learn). This branch of psychology is closely related to other disciplines, such as neuroscience, philosophy and linguistics. At the center of cognitive psychology is how people acquire, process and store information. Many say that cognitive psychology is the study of intelligence. Practical applications for cognitive research may include how to improve memory, increase the accuracy of decision-making, or how to set up educational programs to boost learning.
* **Developmental psychology** - this is the scientific study of systematic psychological changes that a person experiences over the course of his/her life span. Developmental psychology is often referred to as human development. It used to just focus on infants and young children, but also includes teenagers and adults today - the whole human life span. Developmental psychology includes any psychological factor that is studied over the life of a person, including motor skills, problem solving, moral understanding, acquiring language, emotions, personality, self-concept and identity formation. Developmental psychology also looks and compares innate mental structures against learning through experience. For example, babies are thought to be born with an LAD (language acquisition device) - an inbuilt ability to acquire language. A developmental psychologist will be interested in how the LAD works compared to the baby's development through experience, and how the two interplay. A developmental psychologist will be interested in how a person's characteristics interact with environmental factors and how development is impacted. Developmental psychology overlaps with several other branches of psychology, as well as other disciplines, such as linguistics.
* **Evolutionary psychology** - this looks at how human behavior has been affected by psychological adjustments during evolution. Just as biologists talk about natural selection or sexual selection during evolution, this branch of psychology applies psychology to the same way of thinking. An evolutionary psychologist believes, for example, that language or memory perception are functional products of natural selection. Some evolutionary psychologists hypothesize that language learning is a capacity we are born with, making language learning a virtually automatic process - but not reading or writing. In other words, they believe our ability to learn language is inherited while our ability to read and write is not (language learning will happen automatically, while reading and writing has to be taught). A person who is born in a town that speaks French will speak French by the time he is 20. However, if he is not taught to read he will be illiterate - language is acquired automatically if it exists around you, while reading and writing are not. An evolutionary psychologist believes that our human psychological traits are adaptations for survival in the everyday environment of our ancestors.
* **Forensic psychology** - this involves applying psychology to criminal investigation and the law. A forensic psychologist practices psychology as a science within the criminal justice system and civil courts. Forensic psychology involves understanding criminal law in the relevant jurisdictions in order to interact with judges, lawyers and other professionals of the legal system. Forensic psychology involves the ability to testify in court, to present psychological findings in legal language to the courtroom, and to provide data to legal professionals in a clear way. A forensic psychologist needs to understand the rules, standards, and philosophy of his/her country's judicial system.
* **Health psychology** - also called behavioral medicine or medical psychology. This branch observes how behavior, biology and social context influence illness and health. While a doctor treats the illness, the health psychologist will focus more on the person who has the illness, by finding out about their socioeconomic status and background, behaviors that may have an impact on the disease (such as medication compliance), plus the biological reasons for the illness. The aim of the health psychologist is to improve the patient's overall health by analyzing disease in the context of biopsychosocial factors. Biopsychosocial refers to the biological, psychological, and social aspects in contrast to the strictly biomedical aspects of disease. Health psychologists generally work alongside other medical professionals in clinical settings.
* **Neuropsychology** - studies the structure and function of the brain in relation to clear behaviors and psychological processes. Neuropsychology is also involved in lesion studies in the brain, as well as recording electrical activity from cells and groups of cells in higher primates, including some human studies. A neuropsychologist will use a Neuropsychological Evaluation - a systematic assessment procedure - to determine the degree of any possible behavioral problems following suspected or diagnosed brain injury in a patient. When diagnosis is made, some patients are treated with an individualized cognitive remediation protocol - a treatment that helps the patient overcome his/her cognitive deficits.
* **Occupational psychology** (also known as industrial-organizational psychology, I-O psychology, work psychology, organizational psychology, work and organizational psychology, occupational psychology, personnel psychology or talent assessment) - studies the performance of people at work and in training, develops an understanding of how organizations function and how people and groups behave at work. The occupational psychologist aims to increase effectiveness, efficiency, and satisfaction at work.
* **Social psychology** - uses scientific methods to understand and explain how feeling, behavior and thoughts of people are influenced by the actual, imagined or implied presence of other people. A social psychologist will look at group behavior, social perception, non-verbal behavior, conformity, aggression, prejudice, and leadership. Social perception and social interaction are seen as key to understanding social behavior. Put simply, social psychology studies the impact of social influences on human behavior.

**A short history of psychology**

In a philosophical context psychology was around thousands of years ago in ancient Greece, Egypt, India, Persia and China. Medieval Muslim psychologists and doctors had a more clinical and experimental approach to psychology - they were the first to have psychiatric hospitals.

Pierre Cabanis (France) created biological psychology in 1802. A physiologist, Cabanis wrote a well known essay called "Relations between the physical and moral aspects of man" *("Rapports du physique et du moral de l'homme")*. He interpreted the mind according to his previous studies of biology. He believed that sensibility and soul were parts of the nervous system.

**1879, the birthdate of psychology** - In 1879 Wilhelm Wundt, Germany, founded psychology as a truly independent experimental field of study. He set up the first laboratory that carried out psychological research exclusively at Leipzig University. Wundt is known today as the father of psychology.

* **Psychoanalysis** - Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), Austria, developed psychoanalysis - a method of psychotherapy. His understanding of the mind was mainly based on interpretive methods, introspection and clinical observations. He focused on resolving unconscious conflict, mental distress and psychopathology. Freud's theories on sexuality and the unconscious mind became famous; probably because sexuality was a taboo subject at the time. The main principle of Freud's theory was that the unconscious is responsible for most thought and behavior in everybody and the disorders of the mentally ill. Freud had a considerable influence in psychiatrist Carl Jung (Switzerland).
* **Structuralism vs. Functionalism** - E. B Titchener (USA), a student of Wundt, strongly believed in structuralism. William James and John Dewey were strong believers in functionalism. Structuralism is interested in *what is consciousness* while functionalism is interested in *what is consciousness for, What are the purposes or functions of consciousness and basic mental processes?*
Structuralists and functionalists disagreed with each other passionately. Most agree there was never a clear winner in the debate - but their discussion did lead to a rapid spread of psychology in the USA, as well as some other parts of the world. Stanley Hall set up the first psychology lab in the United States at Johns Hopkins University.
* **Behaviorism** - in 1913 an American psychologist, John B. Watson, founded a new movement that altered the focus of psychology. Watson believed that structuralists and functionalists deviated too much from objective science. Put simply, Watson said that psychology should focus on the study of behavior because he believed that behavior was not the result of internal mental processes, but rather the result of how we respond to stimuli from the environment. Behaviorism focused on how people learn new behavior from the environment. Behaviorism became very popular in the USA. B. F Skinner followed in Watson's footsteps.
* **Humanism** - some psychologists viewed behaviorism and psychoanalytic theory as too dehumanizing. Rather than being victims of the environment or the unconscious, humanists said that humans are innately good and that our own mental processes played an active role in our behavior. The humanist movement valued highly our emotions, free will, and a subjective view of experience.
* **Cognitive Theory** - this started in the 1970s and is seen as the most recent school of thought in psychology. Cognitive perspective is much more objective and calculating than humanism. However, it differs from behaviorism in that it focuses on mental processes extensively. Cognitive theorists believe that we take in information from our environment through our senses and then process the data mentally by organizing it, manipulating it, remembering it, and relating it to information we had stored previously. Cognitive theory is applied to language, memory, learning, perceptual systems, mental disorders and dreams.
* **Today** - dominant movements do not really exist today in the way they used to. Behaviorism, psychoanalytic theory, humanism, and cognitive perspective are all studied currently by psychologists. Psychology has become much more eclectic (selecting what appears to be best from every doctrine, movement or school of thought).