

Structuralism and edward titchener psychology essay



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Edward Titchener was a famous psychologist who was born in Chichester, England in 1867. He studied physiology, classics, and philosophy at Malvern College and Oxford University before pursuing his doctorate degree in clinical psychology at the University of Leipzig (King, Viney, & Woody, 2009). While at the University of Leipzig, Titchener studied under Wilhelm Wundt, a psychologist who is known as the father of experimental psychology (Schultz & Schultz, 2011). After Titchener completed his doctoral degree in Germany, he attempted to obtain a job in England, but was not successful in doing so. He ended up earning a job at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York as a professor of psychology. At the age of 28, Titchener earned the title of full professor at Cornell (King et al., 2009).

While at Cornell, Titchener published eight books, over 60 articles, and translated much of Wundt's work into English (Schultz & Schultz, 2011). As the head of one of the most rigorous doctoral programs in the United States, he supervised over 50 students in the clinical psychology program at Cornell (King et al., 2009). Titchener's first student who graduated was Margaret Floy Washburn, who later became famous for her work in comparative psychology, which is the study of human behavior in relation to animals and other species (King et al., 2009). In a time period when most schools would not accept women into their programs, Titchener had 19 women graduate under his supervision. This was the most of any other male psychologist in his generation (Hergenhahn, 2008).

Titchener structured the doctoral program at Cornell based on the German model, which included an intense mixture of lab research and independent work. While his students worked independently, he was heavily involved in

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helping them out with their research. Titchener was described as having a powerful personality, a strong character, and a paternalistic way with his students (King et al., 2009).

Wundt and Titchener both believed in using introspection to discover the mental elements of human experience. Both of these scientists also believed that identifying and classifying sensations and feelings were an essential part of understanding the human experience (Chung & Hyland, 2012).

However, Titchener felt images were a category of mental elements, and Wundt did not. Both Wundt and Titchener used an experimental approach in their work. However, Wundt believed that psychology cannot only be studied as an experimental science. He felt that psychology should also be studied through historical analyses and naturalistic observation (Chung & Hyland, 2012). In addition, Wundt believed that the methods used to study psychology could be utilized to describe social customs, religion, myths, morals, art, law, and language (King et al., 2009). Titchener's view was more rigid in that he only believed that psychology could be studied in the laboratory through evidence-based methods. Another difference between Titchener and Wundt was that Wundt believed that physical events could be explained by antecedent events, and that higher psychological processes could not be studied in the laboratory (Schultz & Schultz, 2011). Titchener only studied psychology through introspection, focusing on internal processes (Hergenhahn, 2008).

Titchener's goal for psychology was to make it an accepted science, classified in the same category as physics and chemistry (King et al., 2009).

He firmly believed that psychology should be studied in a laboratory, and <https://assignbuster.com/structuralism-and-edward-titchener-psychology-essay/>

that studying psychology was no different than studying physics, chemistry, and other hard sciences. Titchener's view on psychology was called Structuralism. He believed that human thoughts, emotions, and behaviors could be charted on a table as elements are on the periodic table.

Titchener's view was reductionistic in that he did not feel it was important to understand how the parts of the mind worked together as a whole, but just the individual parts themselves. He felt that if each part could be understood then all one would need to do is to learn how these parts interact to conclude in a thought or behavior.

Structuralism had five main goals for psychology; 1) to study it using specific methods, 2) to provide more definitions in the field of psychology, 3) to use it to make assumptions about more general philosophical issues, 4) to make connections between the physical sciences and psychology, and 5) to prove that psychology should be in the same category as the hard sciences.

Titchener believed that all science begins with experience, and that without this, there could be no cognition or knowledge. He felt that experiences could have various points of view depending on the person who is experiencing the situation. Titchener believed that the main difference between the accepted physical sciences and psychology was that psychological experience was dependent on human judgment, and the other physical sciences were not dependent on human experience.

While Titchener had many goals for psychology, he identified the current problems with psychology, and why it was not an accepted science.

Titchener believed that the basic elements of experience needed to be

identified and categorized. Next, understanding how each element interacts with another was essential to understanding human experience. Finally, causal relations between experiences needed to be identified. Titchener believed that the method of studying psychology was not different than any other science. While hard scientists used inspection to make many of their observations, Titchener called the observation by psychologist's introspection. While many criticized introspection due to its subjective nature, Titchener firmly believed introspection could be objective if individuals were formally trained in the practice. Introspection was a scientific form of observation in Titchener's eyes. According to Titchener, observation is considered scientific if it has three properties; 1) one can isolate the experience, 2) the experience can be varied, and 3) the experience can be repeated.

Titchener believed that the senses were the key access points to the mind. One of his specific goals was to identify mental elements connected to each sense. After he identified each element, Titchener wanted to categorize the elements. The three mental elements that Titchener identified were: 1) affections, which were emotions, 2) images, which were ideas, memories, and thoughts, and 3) sensation, which related to perception. He believed that all sensations had four characteristics; 1) quality, which was the main descriptor, 2) intensity, which was the strength or amount, 3) clearness, which was how clearly the sensation could be identified, and 4) duration, which was the duration of the sensation. The mental elements could have more than these four characteristics, but all had these. The only mental element that did not have all four was affections because Titchener did not

believe that emotions were distinct or easy to identify. Titchener had a unique view on the mind and body relationship.

Titchener believed that the mind and body influence each other, but that they were two different views of the same experience. According to him, the mind and body were parallel and never physically interacted, but one could influence the other. Some historians classified Titchener as a psychophysical parallelist, but this was controversial. This may have been thought to be controversial because a true parallelist would never say that the mind and body could influence one another in any way. Another unique aspect to Titchener's opinion on the mind and body relationship was that he did not believe in commonsense interactionism. This was likely due to his empiricist nature that everything had to be objectively studied in a lab setting.

Titchener influenced many aspects of psychology that are important today.

The first area of psychology that Titchener was interested in was attention. He separated attention into two categories; primary and secondary. Primary attention was passive and involuntary. It was influenced by intense stimuli, and thought to be related to novel and sudden stimuli. According to Titchener, secondary attention was active and voluntary. This involved attention under situations in which one needs to actively concentrate when distractors are in the environment. Titchener felt that this was related to advanced stages of development, and that infants were not capable of secondary attention. Another area of psychology that Titchener was interested in was associations.

Titchener wanted to analyze how the mental elements of human experience interact; therefore, understanding associations was important to him.

Titchener appreciated how philosophers such as Aristotle, Hobbes, and Bain placed a large emphasis on association. Titchener proposed that all association can be broken down to the law of contiguity. He felt that every law of association involved contiguity. Titchener also believed that emotions do not play an important part in association. Titchener stated, “ feelings only play a role by virtue of their sensory and imaginal components, and not their affective character” (Cite). Titchener thought highly of Ebbinghaus’s work with nonsense syllables in regard to understanding association, but he felt that Ebbinghaus was missing an important component, intrinsic meaning. Titchener believed that personal impressions and associative processes operate together, and they cannot be separated. Titchener understood that intrinsic processes in humans are important, and cannot be left out when studying association. A third area of psychology that Titchener studied was meaning.

Titchener believed that meaning, from a psychological perspective, had everything to do with context. In his opinion, meaning was a combination of the laws of attention and the laws of the connection of sensations. Titchener believed that everything humans see and experience had a context and a background. He understood that when individuals process things, memories of their past experiences play a large role in how they interpret what they experience. Titchener felt that the context of a situation or object was the psychological equivalent of its actual meaning. Interestingly, he noted that humans frequently had difficulty in identifying their own contexts when

doing introspection. Emotion was another area that Titchener was interested in studying.

In the area of emotion, Titchener had a problem with the James-Lange theory, which states that humans experience emotions based on how the body behaves. For example, when we see a bear, we run, and then become afraid. There were a number of reasons why Titchener had a problem with this theory. First, he believed it was not a novel theory, in that Descartes and Spinoza discussed physical origins of emotions. Next, Titchener felt that there were specific flaws in this theory. He argued that physical changes in the body may look exactly the same for different emotions. For example, when somebody is crying, it could be tears of joy as opposed to tears of despair. In addition, Titchener felt that bodily sensations were too simple of an explanation for emotions, which are complicated and not easily defined. He wrote in detail about how difficult categorizing emotions was, and stated that most theorists that attempt to understand and classify emotions do it subjectively, and their theories are not scientific.

Toward the end of Titchener's career, he became frustrated with his inability to identify and quantify all of the mental processes in human experience. Instead of having three main elements (Images, sensation, and affections), he proposed that affect was simply a byproduct of sensations images and sensations. Specifically, Titchener believed that affect may have been a form of sensation on a spectrum from pleasant to unpleasant. In addition, he proposed that images may have been a type of sensation. Titchener separated himself from trying to identify and classify all mental processes, and grew to feel that human experience was more abstract and on a <https://assignbuster.com/structuralism-and-edward-titchener-psychology-essay/>

spectrum. Titchener's Structuralism eventually was overtaken by behaviorism for a number of reasons.

It was hard to defend introspection as an objective, scientific method. It was thought that individuals may not accurately report what they feel and experience. Next, structuralism placed no weight on psychological development, personality, abnormal behavior, learning, individual differences, evolution, and practicality. Behaviorism focused on what could be observed, and the relationship between external events and behavior. This led to a great understanding in learning, performance, and the origin of behaviors. Most importantly, the methods of behaviorism were practical, quantifiable, measurable, classifying them as credibly scientific. Behaviorists criticized Structuralists for focusing too much on the internal, which cannot be observed. Behaviorists studied cause and effect of behavior focusing on external events in the environment. This was more practical and effective than methods such as introspection.

While Titchener's structuralism was too rigid to survive, it paved an important path in the field of psychology for its future. He was the first to fight a fight that has gone on for years, making psychology classified as a true, empirically-based science. Titchener also touched on areas in psychology that are crucial in the field today such as attention, association, meaning, and emotion. While he was not never able to create a periodic table of the mental elements of experience, his empirically-based methods are used today in many areas of psychology.