

# Structuralism vs. functionalism cited assignment

[Sociology](#)



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

## Work of Free online Research Paper Structuralism vs. Functionalism

Structuralism and functionalism explore the human mind; both are concerned with the conscious self, despite the verbal bashing of each side. While they had some similarities, they also had many differences which will be explored below. Structuralism, the first major school of thought in psychology, was founded by Wilhelm Wundt. It is the study of the elements of consciousness, and focused on breaking down mental processes into the most basic components. In Wundt's view, the mind had the power to "organize mental elements voluntarily" (Schultz, D. P. & Schultz, S. E. , 2008, p. 122). In order to do this structuralism relied on a method called introspection. Introspection, however, had a principle flaw and was one basic reason that structuralism completely died in psychology upon Wundt's death (Psychology World, 2006). The subject agreement and reliability of structuralism was not consistent with mainstream views of experimental psychologists today (Psychology World, 2006).

It maintained that a "conscious experience must be described in its most basic terms," (Psychology World, 2006). Structuralism was also later criticized, mainly by behaviorists, claiming that the theory dealt primarily with internal behavior. It was argued that this was a non-observable element of consciousness which could not be measured accurately. Functionalism formed as a reaction to structuralism; it was influenced by the work of William James and the evolutionary theory of Charles Darwin. Functionalism is concerned with how the mind functions, and therefore also used the method of introspection. Functionalists studied the mind not from the standpoint of its composition-its mental elements of structure-but rather as a

conglomerate or accumulation of functions and processes that lead to practical consequences in the real world” (Schultz, D. P. & Schultz, S. E. , 2008, p. 145). Functionalism emphasized individual differences, which had a great impact on education. John Dewey went on to use the theories of functionalism to determine that children should learn at the level appropriate for which they are developmentally prepared.

However, just as structuralism had its disbelievers, so did functionalism. The term function was used loosely. It can refer to both how the mental process operates, and how the mental process functions in the evolution of species (Oxford Companion, 2006). Because it lacked a clear definition, it was subjected to the same problematic aspects of structuralism. This is when behaviorism was introduced. “ Behaviorism dealt solely with observable behavioral acts that could be described in objective terms” (Schultz, D. P. & Schultz, S.

E. , 2008, p. 520). Theoretically, structuralism and functionalism had similarities. The most obvious similarity is that they both took interest in the mental process; after all functionalism was only formed as a reaction to the flaws of structuralism. Further, both used introspection as a method to explore their ideas. Lastly, both structuralism and functionalism had a desire for psychology to become scientific. While there were some comparisons in these two schools of thoughts, there were definitely more differences in the two.

As mentioned earlier, functionalism developed, to a certain degree, as a reaction against structuralism. It was thought that psychological processes

would be best understood in terms of their function rather than their structure. In other words, structuralism asked what happens when an organism does something, and functionalism asked how and why.

Functionalism drew on evolutionary theory rather than modeling psychological processes on the combination of mental elements. Breaking away from functionalism, behaviorism dealt with observable behavior as a result of environmental stimuli.

This was in contrast to focusing on the internal mental process which rejected introspection and called for a more scientific method. Structuralism did not withstand the test of time and soon faded out despite an intensive program of research which relied on the contemplation of one's own thoughts, desires, and conduct. The experimental methods used in structuralism would not hold up to today's standards; the experiments were too subjective and the results were therefore unreliable. Functionalism emphasized the function, or purposes, of behavior as opposed to its analysis and description, and soon disappeared as a separate school because it lacked the kind of exactness needed to facilitate its theory. Despite its disappearance as a separate school of psychology "functionalism never really died, it became part of the mainstream psychology" (Oxford Companion, 2006). The importance of looking at process rather than structure is a common attribute of modern psychology. As an individual approach it lacked a clear formulation and inherited problems from the structuralist reliance on introspection, however the theory of functionalism is still around today.

This writer believes that structuralism is important because it was the first major school of thought in psychology and because it influenced experimental psychology. However, other than the effect it has had on the history of psychology it has no place in modern psychology. Functionalism has had a great impact of modern psychology. As she will become a teacher soon, this writer cannot help but be grateful for the impact functionalism had on the educational system.

The writer also feels that all functionalism is the underlying component of psychology; the purpose of the consciousness and behavior is applied to all areas of psychological study. Works Cited Oxford Companion to the Mind.

(2006). William James and Functionalism. Retrieved October 7, 2006 at <http://www.psych.utah.edu/gordon/Classes/Psy4905Docs/PsychHistory/Cards/James.html>

Psychology World. (2006). Structuralism. Retrieved October 7, 2006 at <http://web.umn.edu/~psyworld/structuralism.htm#1>

Psychology World. (2006). Structuralism. Retrieved October 7, 2006 at <http://web.umn.edu/~psyworld/structuralism.htm#1>

Schultz, D. P. & Schultz, S. E. (2008). A History of Modern Psychology (9th ed. ). California: Thomas Wadsworth.