

Functionalism in
psychology history
principles and
contributions
philosophy essay...



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This essay shows a history of functionalism, its principles and contributions. It includes four stages of psychology in the United States, development of functionalism and notable functionalists focusing on Willam James. It shows the theory of free will, habits and instincts, James's early years, mind-body debate, consciousness, emotions and the self. The development of self-esteem by James Williams could probably help social workers, counselors and psychologists to tackle clients who are troubled, bullied, depressed, anaroxic or suicidal.

Functionalism in Psychology: History, Principles & Contributions

The alternative model to structuralism was known as functionalism. Founded by William James, who agreed with Edward Titchner that the study of consciousness must be the central theme of psychology. But James disagreed with structuralists' search for basic elements of mind, he rather emphasized that psychologists should study how the mind functions. James published a book titled 'Principles of Psychology' in 1890, which promoted functionalism. He agreed that consciousness is an ongoing stream, a property of the mind that continually interacts with the environment. Through this interaction, human beings learn to adapt to their environment. For him, the functions of mind were more important than the structures of mind (Hergenhahn, 2005).

This paper will represent the history, principles and current contributions of functionalism. According to Sahakian (1975), there are four stages of early United States Psychology. The pre-revolution, first stage between the year 1640 - 1776, the using of reasoning to differentiate between God, beliefs,

religion and state. Second stage between the year 1776 - 1886, commonsense philosophers have agreed to take feelings and senses as equal to reason. Third stage between the year 1886 - 1896, psychology is separated from philosophy and religion. In the final fourth stage, the publication of John Dewey's article "The Reflex Arc in Psychology" in the year 1896 and the mixture of science, apprehension for practicality, importance on individual and evolutionary theory combined together into the school of functionalism.

Functionalism was rooted in Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. Evolution is based on individual differences and the survival of adaptive features. Adaptation becomes a popular approach to measuring intelligence and Individual Differences become a valued part of mental research. Unlike most other psychologists who were interested in the structure of mental activity, functionalists were interested in functions, the mental aspects of adapting to an environment. Functionalists were equally interested in individual differences of all mental activity.

Functionalism started with John Locke's political theory influenced the American and French Constitutions (Hergenhahn, 2005). His views on education have contributed to the thoughts of every subsequent theorizer in the field. The mind at birth possesses no innate ideas. The mind of man is a tabula rasa or blank slate at birth, upon which is impressed many sense impressions. All knowledge proceeds through sense experience. As the mind stores up a variety of sense impressions, associations occur which provide new knowledge. The mind is consequently passive. The senses provide the mind with the materials which represent reality. These materials are not

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identical with the extra mental object. The material is the idea within the mind which represents the object outside the mind being received by the senses. By combining, comparing and analyzing these materials or ideas arising through sensations, we derive thoughts. Knowledge is not sense perception but intellectual perception.

Functionalists like American philosopher, John Dewey who criticized reductionistic approaches to psychology and argued that experience must be understood in a naturalistic context. He applied the assumptions of functionalism in developing the field of school psychology and educational practices. As the functionalists studied the functions of consciousness, gradually their attention shifted to the learning process itself. They paid less attention to the study of consciousness and more to the environmental conditions that facilitate mental functions.

William James was the most influential functionalist. He presented much of the foundation functional psychology, but he did not develop his ideas to the point of an independent "school" of study. He endorsed some aspects of functionalism, and considered the father of American psychology. Consistent with materialism and evolution, James believed that science opposed the existence of free will. In turn, he proposed free will to be beyond the realm of science. The nature of free will is reflected in voluntary behaviour. To control our voluntary behaviour, we must control the ideas of behaviour. "Ideas of action" can lead to action, or can be held back consciously. According to James, both habits and instinct are within the brain (not in the mind) and outside of free will (Hergenhahn, 2005). Habits are learned and continuous repetition could stabilize mental functions in the brain. Instincts are

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unlearned and they are learned patterns of reacting. Instincts are not “ blind and invariable” and can be moulded by habit.

James was initially impressed with the scientific advancements tied to both materialism and evolution, but those sciences left him disappointed and even depressed. His depression ended while reading about free will. He doubted free will was an illusion if he could voluntarily believe in free will. Voluntary belief also influenced his approach to science. His major publication was *Principles of Psychology* which provided a solid foundation of modern psychology in America. James attempted to cover every aspect of psychology and took twelve years to write it, and it was 1, 393 pages long (published as two volumes).

Principles of Psychology generally support a dualist, interactionist approach to human nature. James presents separate “ mind phenomena” and “ brain phenomena”, and proposes ways in which they interact. Most experimental psychologists at that time were looking for elements of consciousness. James represented the concept of a stream of consciousness. According to James, consciousness is not made up of a bunch of little pieces put together. Consciousness is personal (no need for common elements), continuous (cannot be dismantled), always changing, always selective and choosing (free will) and dealt of objects other than itself (the purpose is functional and adaptive).

According to James, the self is the sum of all things which a person can call “ mine”. Including the body and all possessions (material self), the self as it is known by others (social self) and spiritual self(Hergenhahn, 2005). Self as

knower (the “ I”, “ pure ego”) is an ultimate vantage point, self that does the knowing and a part of you that remains constant in a changing stream of consciousness. Self-esteem is a ratio of the actual self over the potential self. Esteem could come from achievements and from lowering expectations. The classic theory of emotion in functionalism is stimulus, emotion and response; perceive object, experience emotion and respond to it. Another theory of emotion is stimulus, response and emotion; the behaviour is a functional reaction to the stimulus and the emotion is the result of the response. As a functional result, behaviours associated with how you want to feel can give you that feeling. Functionalism was an overwhelming achievement, unfortunately, it was absorbed into the mainstream psychology and not on its own.

However, the study of functionalism and the self resulted the development of the study of self-esteem which helps the world till today. James had a very simple definition of self-esteem: success divided by pretension. According to James the more success we have and the lower our expectations or pretensions then the higher our self-esteem. To raise self-esteem, therefore, we have two options: lower our expectations of ourselves or increase our achievements. This theory gives us and psychologists a better understanding on how people react to their thoughts and perhaps to tackle depression and maintain self-esteem. Functionalism has taught us on how to get a better understanding of the functions of the mind and perhaps this theory could be useful for psychologists, counsellors and social workers who meet with suicidal or depressed clients.