

Case study: structuralism and functionalism



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In this assignment the assumptions of structuralism and functionalism will be analysed to see how they have affected modern experimental psychology and critically evaluate the strengths and weaknesses throughout the following paragraphs.

Introduction

Experimental psychology began at the end of the nineteenth century with Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1920) (Gross, 2010), establishing the first formal psychological laboratory in Leipzig, Germany; 1879 (Gross, 2010). This laboratory was seen as the predecessor of the psychological revolution; Wundt was largely interested in the structure of the conscious adult mind believing that mental processes could be broken down into their basic elements and analysing how these elements interacted with each other. After this discipline was discovered an American psychologist Edward Titchener (1867-1927) (Gross, 2010), who was a student of Wundt, brought that particular discipline to the United States of America, like Wundt he believed the main goal of psychology was to study mental structures. The label Structuralism was introduced to describe this approach (Stein, 1991).

Structuralism was known for its experimental self-observation and because of that; the approach was only short lived, giving way to a new approach called Functionalism.

Although this assumption didn't have a single creator, William James (1842-1910) became the spokesperson for the functionalists (Gross, 2010), it was created as a reaction to the introspected approach of Structuralism. However James did agree that psychology should be the study of mental processes, and rather than breaking the components down into its basic elements, he proposed it would be better to attempt to understand the functional, continually changing and the personal nature of the conscious experience. He was particularly interested in how humans and animals adapt to their environments and was greatly influenced by Charles Darwin's evolution theory (Stein, 1991).

Structuralism in modern experimental psychology

Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1920) (Gross, 2010), was influenced by philosophical values which affected his work throughout his lifetime and through the mid nineteenth century he began to research and teach the subject of physiology, whilst publishing many journals upon the subject of physiology, it has been said that he also established the development and basis for experimental psychology. Wundt wanted experimental psychology to not restrict to the natural sciences and insisted on combining objective methods with self-observation (Mandler, 2007).

“ Hence, even in the domain of natural science the aid of the experimental method becomes indispensable whenever the problem set is the analysis of

transient and impermanent phenomena, and not merely the observation of persistent and relatively constant objects” (Wundt, 1904).

This was an introspected view upon the discipline and is seen as unreliable and unscientific by today’s modern standards. He also considered it to be part of an exact mental or social science (Mandler, 2007). In some of the journals he wrote, the work revolved around mental processors and the experiments he conducted in his laboratory, which included experimental observation and manipulation; such as reaction time to stimuli. Laboratory experiments such as these still exist in modern day psychology, and have therefore been influenced by Wundt’s early work. In his later journal’s he described the social side of the assumption, which involved the use of higher and more complex mental processes. These experiments could no longer be brought under direct control in the laboratory, and would refer to religion, social practices, and language, also known as *Volkerpsychologie* (Psychology. sbc, 2009). The subject matter of *Volkerpsychologie*, could not be investigated experimentally but must be explored using comparative historical methods (D, 1998).

“ *Volkerpsychologie* is the result of a conviction between certain mental phenomena which may not be interpreted satisfactorily by any psychology which restricts itself to the standpoint of individual consciousness” (Green, 2001).

This approach has emphasised the study of linguistics, cultural and social psychology in modern times. (Green, 2001). One of Wundt’s students was Edward Titchener (1867-1927) (Gross, 2010), he helped further adapt the

assumption by focusing more on consciousness rather than the mind. In modern scientific standards, the experimental methods used to study the structures of the mind are too subjective and the use of introspection can lead to a lack of reliability in results. (Cherry, Early schools of thought Structuralism and Functionalism, 2010). It was noted that the major research tool in structuralism often altered the nature of the conscious mental process that they wished to analyze, an even more damaging flaw was the fact that those who used the introspected approach found that their results were often different from one another (Stein, 1991). Structuralism's main emphasis on modern experimental psychology is the use of science and scientific methods; it also induced laboratory experiments which we still use in much psychological research. The old structuralism methods are now too subjective, unreliable and limiting (Cherry, The Origins of Psychology, 2010).

Although it was criticized as being impractical by American psychologists who thought the assumption should offer more solutions to everyday life problems. The approach died out when Titchener passed away in 1927. Creating a pathway for a new psychological school that dealt with important areas that structuralism left out, such as the evolutionary theory and creating more valid and reliable research, this approach became known as Functionalism (Stein, 1991).

Functionalism in modern experimental psychology

William James (1842-1910), became the fore founder for the functionalists; he was greatly influenced by the evolutionary theory of Charles Darwin, they believed that mental functions had a process which was to aid any organism adapting to its environment, the assumption was to be a practical science

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but not a pure one, they wanted the findings to aid in the improvement of the quality of life such as education, personal life and industry. In modern experimental psychology the functionalists broadened the subject to include research on animals, disabled humans and children. The assumption emphasises on the introduction of individual differences which also affects the modern day educational system (Psychology, 2009).

“ Individuality is founded in feeling; and the recesses of feeling, the darker, blinder strata of character are the only places in the world in which we catch real fact in the making, and directly perceive how events happen, and how work is actually done” (William James, 2005).

The functionalists also urged the broadening into the subject of methodology which includes puzzle boxes, mazes and mental tests. One of the most important events in psychology history was the publication of William James landmark text “ Principles of Psychology” in 1890, this two volume book is still considered to be one of the most important psychological texts of all time (Stein, 1991).

The functionalists were interested in the “ why” part of mental processes and behaviour which led directly to the subject matter of motivation, they accepted both mental processes and behaviour as legitimate subject matters of psychology and they also viewed the matter of introspection as a valid research tool. The functionalists were generally more interested in what made organisms different from one another rather than what made them the same (Psychology, 2009).

“ How to gain, how to keep, how to recover happiness is in fact for most men at all times the secret motive of all they do, and of all they are willing to endure” (James, 2008).

Just like Structuralism, Functionalism had its disbelievers and being so closely related, it also used introspection, the term function was loosely used and because it lacked actual definition it was subject to the same criticism as its counterpart. Functionalism has influenced other schools of psychology such as behaviourism and applied psychology. Other functionalists such as John Dewey founded a progressive education system by which children should be taught at the mental capacity they are able to learn. (Muhammad, 2009).

Conclusion

Both Structuralism and Functionalism have played important roles in modern experimental psychology. The most monumental contribution is the use of science in these disciplines and the fact that both assumptions have influenced the school of behaviourism. Structuralism brought psychology to the laboratory and it also helped develop the study of linguistics, cultural and social psychology. Whilst Functionalism broadened psychology into the study of disabled adults, children and animals; as well as expanded the data to include observations of behaviour. It also introduced varieties of research techniques in psychology such as puzzle boxes, mazes and mental tests.