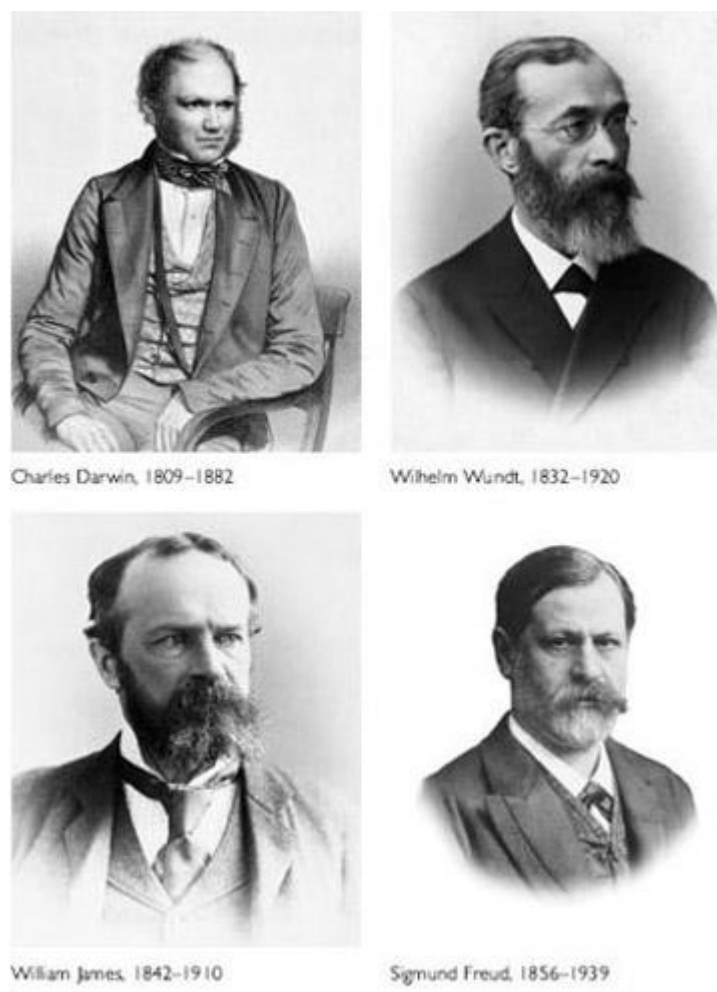


## 4-1 The diversity of psychology

### 4-1a The founding fathers of psychology

Since psychology is concerned with the full range of what makes us human, it is not surprising that the scope of the discipline is extensive. Psychology has always been a diverse, multi-perspective discipline. This partly results from its origins. Psychological questions were asked first by philosophers, then increasingly by biologists, physiologists and medical scientists. The diverse origins of psychology are visible if we consider four ‘founders’ of psychology – all of whom produced influential work at the end of the nineteenth century.



**Figure 1** The four founders of psychology

In 1877, **Charles Darwin**, the biologist who later put forward the theory of evolution, was doing the first scientific infant-observation study, observing and writing about his son's behaviours and emotions in descriptive psychological terms. Darwin was trying to make inferences about what his baby's internal mental states might be, based on what he could

observe ‘from the outside’. Darwin went on to become a renowned biological scientist whose methods were essentially the painstaking collection, description, categorisation and cataloguing of biological diversity. These were the data that later provided the evidence for his theory of evolution.

**Wilhelm Wundt** is considered by many to have started psychology as a formal discipline when he opened the first psychological laboratory in 1879 in Leipzig, Germany. He was interested both in philosophical and physiological questions and, as a result, advocated a range of methodological approaches to collecting evidence. His own methods included use of the *scientific experimental method*, *introspection* (asking people to think about and report on their inner feelings and experiences), and *ethnography* (observations of human culture).

**William James**, an American professor trained in philosophy, medicine and physiology, who published the influential *Principles of Psychology* in 1890, also advocated a multi-method approach that included introspection and observation. **Sigmund Freud**, the first psychoanalyst, was a medical doctor and research physiologist who opened his psychology consulting room in Vienna in 1886. Freud, working at the same time as Wundt and James, pioneered a method that involved listening closely to people's personal *accounts* of their symptoms, emotions, and their lives more generally, asking insightful questions and attending to the particulars of language use and unconscious phenomena.

The methods established by Darwin, Wundt, James and Freud – observation and description, experimentation, introspection and a focus on language – provided psychology with the beginnings of its diverse traditions. Some of these continue to be influential, whilst others have lost favour or been substantially developed.

## 4-1b The development of psychology as a science

Although psychology has diverse roots, psychologists with different approaches and methods have not always happily coexisted. There have been many heated debates about the scope of the subject matter and methods that can be claimed to be psychological. Many of the clashes have been about what can be thought of as ‘real’ or ‘legitimate’ evidence. But it has not just been individuals with their own inspirations and beliefs who have introduced particular ways of doing psychology. Different historical periods, cultures and countries generate their own assumptions about what to study and how knowledge, including psychological knowledge is, therefore, situated in time and place.

A graphic example of this concerns the impact of the Second World War on the development of Western psychology. Many Jewish German psychologists and others from German-occupied territories fled, some to Britain (for example, Freud), but most to the USA. These eminent psychologists brought their substantial influence – their ideas and European way of thinking about psychology – to universities in the USA where psychology was expanding.



And then the horror at what had happened in Nazi Germany led some psychologists to direct their research to issues like authoritarianism, conformity, prejudice, leadership, small-group dynamics and attitudes.

It is not only cataclysmic events that have led to change and development in psychology. There have also been gradual cultural shifts in ways of thinking about how knowledge should be gained and evaluated. It is perhaps not surprising that different historical periods can produce dominant trends in psychology that occur almost simultaneously in different countries – no doubt influenced by international contacts between psychologists. It is striking, for example, how *laboratories* devoted to systematic psychological research were initially founded in several Western countries within about 10 years of each other (see **Table 1**). But the climate of thought can also be very different in different countries and the topics and methods of psychological research, at a given time, may be very different across different countries.

**Table 1** Foundation of early psychological laboratories

Germany:	1879 (Wundt opened the first psychological laboratory in Leipzig)
USA:	1883 (American Psychological Association founded in 1892)
Denmark:	1886
Russia:	1886
Japan:	1888
France:	1889
Italy:	1890
Canada:	1890
Belgium:	1891
Switzerland:	1891
United Kingdom:	1891 (British Psychological Society founded in 1901)
Netherlands:	1892

Source: adapted from Zimbardo et al., 1995, p. 6

In psychology, different historical times have also been characterised by the dominance of different methods and theories. For example, dissatisfaction with the limitations of introspection as a method of enquiry – resulting from the difficulty of reporting on conscious experience – gradually developed in the early twentieth century. This difficulty with the method of looking inward into the conscious mind and with the kinds of data that can be collected by this means led to the rise of *behaviourism*, which became dominant in the 1940s and 1950s. Behaviourism insists that psychologists should study *only* behaviours that are

observable from the outside and should make no inferences at all about mental states and what might be going on inside the head.

Then, in the 1960s, there was a ‘cognitive revolution’, a rather dramatic phrase which describes what was an important shift in thinking about psychology. Many (although not all) researchers in psychology began to take a greater interest in what goes on in the mind. This change of perspective led to what is known as *cognitive psychology*. The shift began with the study of learning, but became established as the study of information processing associated with mental activities such as attention, perception and memory. Researchers in cognitive psychology did not return to introspective methods but devised other ways of testing their ideas about mental processes. They have, for the most part, continued the tradition of using experimental methods but have adapted them to investigate what goes on in the mind; for example, by finding out how well people remember words presented in lists of related words (e.g. ‘Fox’ in a list of animals), compared with words presented in lists of unrelated words. A clear behavioural measure (the numbers of words remembered) can be used to make inferences about how the lists have been processed and how memory works. This scientific experimental method continues to be dominant within psychology.

More recently, there has been a second cognitive revolution; this time the shift being a broadening of focus from mental processes to studying how meaning is understood through cultural practices and language. As a result there are a variety of methods available to psychologists who want to study language and culture. And many psychologists who conduct experimental investigations of cognitive or social processes now also attend to participants’ own accounts of their experiences.

All areas of psychology are increasingly concerned with investigating issues relevant to people's everyday functioning and their social and cultural contexts. The practical and professional application of psychology is important in many areas of life. Psychologists work as professional advisors, consultants or therapists in a range of settings such as education, the workplace, sport and mental health; and they increasingly research areas of immediate practical concern such as dyslexia, stress, police interviewing of eye-witnesses, and autism.

So, whilst earlier traditions like psychoanalysis or behaviourism still contribute and produce important innovations, the discipline of psychology has continued to develop in ways which have fostered an ever broader range of perspectives. No one approach is either ‘right’, or adequate for answering all psychological questions. As a result, psychology is now seen as legitimately multifaceted, with many traditions working in parallel, and also drawing on other disciplines and their methods for inspiration.

