

Research Paper

## Psychology Through the Centuries: A Historical Analysis of Its Evolving Definition from the 16<sup>th</sup> Century to the Digital Era

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### ABSTRACT

This review provides a historical analysis of psychology's epistemological evolution, tracing its conceptual lineage from the 15th century to the contemporary era. We chart the discipline's definitional transformations, moving from reductionist "behavior and mental processes" models, toward complex frameworks that incorporate the "subject," "comportment," and contextual variables via pluralistic methodologies. The article systematically examines the field's foundational debates, particularly its struggle to resolve the nature of its subject matter, the validity of its measurement tools, and the possibility of a unifying theoretical paradigm. By focusing on recent meta-scientific discourse rather than conventional textbook narratives, this paper illuminates existing controversies (e.g., the "hard science" debate, theoretical fragmentation) and identifies promising areas for future inquiry.

**Keywords:** *Psychologia, Psychology, Etymology, Epistemology, Mind, Soul*

In today's complex and fast-paced world, the importance of psychology has never been more apparent. Once confined to academia and clinical settings, the field has broadened its reach, with psychological principles now applied to nearly every facet of human experience, from education to business and technology. This heightened relevance is underscored by a sobering global mental health crisis. In 2025, the World Health Organization (WHO) released updated data indicating that over one billion people worldwide are living with a mental health disorder. This includes conditions such as anxiety, depression, and stress-related disorders, which have seen a significant increase in recent years, inflicting immense human and economic costs (World Health Organization, 2025).

Research articles and professional analyses confirm this rising need for psychological insight. A July 2025 article from the American Psychological Association (APA) highlighted that, even with technological advancements, the fundamental role of a psychologist as a "scientist of people" remains constant, applying the science to improve the human condition in an increasingly complex world (Bailey, 2020).

The importance of the field of psychology is both undeniable and universally recognized, with an increasing demand for psychological services across countries and populations.

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Determining who requires psychological support necessitates a careful understanding of the nature and characteristics of the signs and symptoms presented by an individual. Accurately identifying such individuals depends on a clear conceptualization of what constitutes psychology and mental well-being in the contemporary context. Thus, before classifying a person as needing psychological assistance, it is essential to differentiate a psychologically healthy individual from one experiencing psychological difficulties, based on a clear and accurate understanding of the definition of psychology.

### ***Understanding the definition of psychology in 2025***

According to the American Psychology Association (APA) the definition of psychology is elaborated as:

“The study of the mind and behavior. It is a diverse scientific discipline comprising several major branches of research (e.g., experimental, biological, cognitive, lifespan developmental, personality, social), as well as several subareas of research and applied psychology (e.g., clinical, industrial/organizational, school and educational, human factors, health, neuropsychology, cross-cultural). Research in psychology involves observation, experimentation, testing, and analysis to explore the biological, cognitive, emotional, personal, and social processes or stimuli underlying human and animal behavior. The practice of psychology involves the use of psychological knowledge for any of several purposes: to understand and treat mental, emotional, physical, and social dysfunction; to understand and enhance behavior in various settings of human activity (e.g., school, workplace, courtroom, sports arena, battlefield); and to improve machine and building design for human use.” (American Psychological Association, 2018).

When examining the definition of psychology provided by the British Psychological Society, one finds that it closely aligns with that of the American Psychological Association (APA, 2020). However, arriving at this contemporary definition has been the result of a long and complex historical journey undertaken by the term psychology itself. To appreciate its present meaning and significance, it is worthwhile to explore the etymological evolution of the word—from its earliest form, *psychologia*, to the modern understanding of psychology as a scientific discipline.

### ***Historical journey of term Psychologia***

The word “psychology” comes from the Greek words *psyche*, meaning soul or mind, and *logia*, meaning study.

The earliest known use of the term *psychologia* is attributed to Marko Marulić from Spalato (Latinized as Marcus Marulus Spalatensis), a scholar from the Republic of Venice, sometime between 1510 and 1520. His usage of the term marks the earliest conceptual emergence of what would later develop into the modern notion of psychology. Marulić, who authored numerous Latin works encompassing poetry and philosophical reflections, is believed to have employed the term *psychologia* in the title of one of his treatises, *Psichiologia de ratione animae humanae*—translated as *Psychology: On the Nature of the Human Soul*—representing one of the first documented attempts to define the study of the human mind and soul in systematic terms (Raffaele d'Isa & Abramson, 2023).

Marulić's contribution was later acknowledged by his biographer, Frano Božićević (1469–1542), who referred to it in his work *Vita Marci Maruli Spalatensis* (The Life of Marcus Marulus of Spalato), composed between 1524 and 1542 (Raffaele d'Isa & Abramson, 2023).

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In 2021, a study by Janssen and Hubbard identified two 1525 works as the earliest known print sources of the term "psychologia," predating the previously accepted date of 1575. One of these works is by Italian scholar Pier Nicola Castellani, whose manuscript defines psychology as the "whole science about the soul" (Sven Hroar Klempe, 2023).

Gerhard Synellius, who employed the expression *psychologia synelliana* to describe his theological interpretations concerning the nature and essence of the human soul (Raffaele d'Isa & Abramson, 2023).

So, till beginning of 16 century the word psychology was restricted to the "Nature of Human Soul".

In the same year, Pier Nicola Castellani incorporated the term *psychologia* in a treatise addressing the immortality of the soul (Castellani, 1525). Within this work, he characterized psychology as a discipline concerned with the study of the soul, positioned conceptually between physics and metaphysics. Castellani's formulation represents one of the earliest attempts to define psychology as an independent field of inquiry situated at the intersection of natural philosophy and metaphysical thought (Sven Hroar Klempe, 2025).

After Castellani the term *psychologia* appeared in the writings of Johann Thomas Freig (1543–1583), a German philosopher who made one of the earliest attempts to classify the sciences systematically. In his *Quaestiones logicae et ethicae* (Logical and Ethical Questions, 1574), Freig employed the term *psychologia* and placed it among the *physica*—the physical sciences—alongside disciplines such as physiology, medicine, zoology, astronomy, and meteorology. This classification reflected an important conceptual shift, positioning the study of the human soul within the framework of natural philosophy rather than purely metaphysical speculation.

In his subsequent work, *Ciceronianus* (1575), Freig expanded this categorization in a chapter titled *De psychologia et hominis fabrica* (On Psychology and the Structure of Man), again situating psychology within the physical sciences while incorporating additional fields such as botany and metallurgy (Lamanna, 2020; Raffaele d'Isa & Abramson, 2023; Sven, 2020).

The term *psychologia* reappeared several decades later in the writings of Rudolf Goclenius (1547–1628), a German philosopher and scholar, who is often credited with formally introducing the term into academic discourse. In his *Lexicon Philosophicum* (1590), Goclenius defined *psychologia* as the systematic study of the soul, thereby transforming it from a purely theological or metaphysical notion into a subject of philosophical investigation. Goclenius's work systematized psychological inquiry into the human mind and behavior, bridging medieval philosophical anthropology and early modern rational psychology (Lamanna, 2010).

After Goclenius's 1590 formulation of *psychologia* as the systematic study of the soul, the term continued to circulate in scholastic and philosophical lexica, where it remained closely tied to metaphysical and theological questions through the 17th century.

Johann Heinrich Alsted, in his 1626 work *Compendium Lexici Philosophici* (Compendium of Philosophical Lexicon), made references to the term *psychologia* — the Latin precursor to "psychology." Alsted treated *psychologia* as a subfield of *physiologia* (physiology), aligning

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it with anatomy and the study of the soul or mind as part of the broader investigation into natural bodies.

This classification reflects the early modern view that psychological phenomena were deeply intertwined with physical and biological processes. Alsted's inclusion of psychologia within a philosophical lexicon also highlights the transitional nature of psychology at the time—not yet a distinct empirical science, but rather a conceptual domain within natural philosophy and theology.

Similarly, Johannes Micraelius (1653) defined psychologia in his *Lexicon philosophicum* as the doctrine concerned with the nature of the soul. Later in the century, Steven Blankaart (1690) adopted the Greek spelling of psychologia in his *Lexicon Novum Medicum Graeco-Latinum*, situating it within the medical lexicon and reinforcing its emerging association with empirical and physiological thought (Raffaele d'Isa & Abramson, 2023).

### ***During the 17th century,***

Cartesian dualism reframed discussions of the soul into debates about mind–body relations, gradually shifting psychology from a largely theological vocabulary toward problems about mental substance and mental processes (Hatfield, 2015; Robinson, 2017).

The final discussion in Descartes' *Dualism* argues that Descartes has been widely misunderstood: he was not a dualist in the way modern philosophers have portrayed him, and many criticisms leveled against him are based on misreadings.

In their concluding analysis, Gordon Baker and Katherine J. Morris challenge the entrenched view that René Descartes was a strict Cartesian dualist who believed in a metaphysical divide between mind and body. They argue that this interpretation is a product of twentieth-century philosophical assumptions rather than a faithful reading of Descartes' own texts.

Throughout the seventeenth century, the term psychologia gradually entered broader intellectual use, even though major philosophers concerned with the study of the mind—such as Descartes, Hobbes, Locke, and Malebranche—did not explicitly employ it in their writings. Instead, the word appeared primarily in scholarly, medical, and encyclopedic contexts that sought to classify human knowledge (Raffaele d'Isa & Abramson, 2023).

### ***In the early 18th century,***

Philosophers and textbook authors began to distinguish branches of the subject—most notably in the work of Christian Wolff and his followers, who divided psychologia into rational (speculative) and empirical (observational) subfields and thereby signaled a move toward systematized, discipline-like treatment.

Key aspects of Wolff's concept include:

- Empirical psychology studies the mind based on experience and observation (a posteriori knowledge).
- Rational psychology studies the soul using logic and reasoning (a priori knowledge) (Wolff, 2019).

The above work was referred to a 1968 reprint of the original 1732 work by the Georg Olms publishing house in Hildesheim.

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**Distinction from Empirical Psychology:** Wolff contrasted rational psychology with empirical psychology, which studies the soul and its operations through sensory experience, observation, and introspection. Christian Wolff's *Psychologia empirica methodo scientifica pertractata* (Empirical Psychology Examined by the Scientific Method, 1732) is widely regarded as a foundational work in the emergence of modern scientific psychology. By applying systematic and methodological principles to the study of mental phenomena, Wolff established a framework that distinguished empirical observation from speculative reasoning. His writings exerted considerable influence throughout the Enlightenment, shaping intellectual discourse across Europe. Building on this momentum, Denis Diderot incorporated an entry on *psychologie* in his *Encyclopédie* (1765), thereby disseminating the concept more broadly and solidifying its presence within the scientific and philosophical vocabulary of the period (Berrios, 1999; Raffaele d'Isa & Abramson, 2023).

### ***Late 18th to Early 19th Century: Transition to the “Science of Mind”.***

Context: Enlightenment empiricism and physiological discoveries began influencing ideas about the mind.

#### ***Key shifts:***

- The soul concept became less theological; scholars spoke instead of mind or mental faculties.
- Psychology began to separate from philosophy, preparing to align with natural science.
- Thinkers like Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) criticized psychology as a science because mental phenomena couldn't be measured — but this critique ironically pushed later psychologists to seek empirical methods (Fritsch, 1975), (Jacobs & Sarton, 1990).
- In early 19th century Psychology was now seen as a science of the mind and its operations, based on introspection and experience. Later in mid-19th Century: Psychology Becomes a “Science of Behavior and Mental Processes”. Then Psychology finally incorporated experimental and scientific domain in it.
- Wilhelm Wundt (1832–1920) founded the first experimental psychology lab in 1879 (Leipzig). Psychology was regarded as a science of conscious experience (Leahey & Mills, 2000; Pierce et al., 1908; Wundt, 1879).
- The late nineteenth century marked a series of pivotal transformations in the conceptualization of psychology.

William James (1842-1910) Known as the "father of American psychology," James promoted a scientific but broader view of the field. His influential 1890 text, *The Principles of Psychology*, argued for the use of experimental methods to study how the mind functions and helps humans adapt to their environment—the basis of the functionalist school of thought (psychology sought to understand consciousness, emotion, and volition through systematic introspection). During this period, the discipline was often characterized as the science of conscious experience—a field devoted to investigating mental states that could be observed and measured under controlled experimental conditions. Concurrently, advances in the physiological study of sensation and perception by scholars such as Helmholtz and Fechner bridged empirical experimentation with philosophical introspection, laying the groundwork for experimental psychology.

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Toward the end of the century, early behaviorists began to challenge introspective methods, arguing instead for a psychology based on the observation and analysis of measurable behavior, thereby initiating a major paradigm shift in the field's theoretical and methodological orientation (Buckley, 1993; D. & C. P. D., 1982).

### ***20th Century: The Dominant Ideas***

In the 20th century psychology developed from philosophical roots into an empirical discipline. Key developments in the definitions were:

- Early 1900s: John Broadus Watson (1878–1958) was an American psychologist best known as the founder of the school of behaviorism. His work fundamentally redefined psychology, shifting its focus from internal, unobservable mental processes to the scientific study of external, observable behavior (Mischel, 1998; Panch, 2016).
- Mid-20th century: The definition broadened to include mental processes (thinking, feeling, perceiving) alongside behaviour. For example, many textbooks by the midcentury define psychology as the scientific study of behaviour and mental processes.
- Ulric Neisser (1928-2012), Often called the "father of cognitive psychology," his 1967 book *Cognitive Psychology* formalized the field. The book defined cognition as the process by which sensory input is "transformed, reduced, elaborated, stored, recovered, and used" (Mischel, 1998).

### ***More formal definition:***

The American Psychological Association (APA) definition frequently cited is that psychology is "the scientific study of behaviour and mental processes". For example, educational material states "Psychology can be defined as the scientific study of human and animal behaviour and mental process." (Cutting, 2012).

The scope in the 20th century: The field progressed through major "schools" — behaviourism (observable behaviour), psychoanalysis (unconscious mental processes), humanistic psychology (whole person, conscious experience), cognitive revolution (mental processing) and the growing influence of biological/neuroscientific perspectives (Cutting, 2012; Mischel, 1998).

### ***Recent changes / refined definitions and scientific research***

While the traditional definition remains influential, more recent work has suggested refinements and even challenges to parts of it:

- A more pluralistic view: For example, according to *Psychology as a Science of Subject and Comportment, beyond the Mind and Behavior* (Pérez-Álvarez, 2017) psychology should be reconceived as "a science of subject and comportment" (i.e., behaviour in context), and not just the "mind & behaviour" dichotomy. The article argues that the standard definition inherits dualistic metaphysical assumptions (mind vs behaviour) and so calls for a more integrated, contextual, human-behaviour-science perspective (Pérez-Álvarez, 2018).
- Emphasis on integration: Modern definitions emphasize bridging biological (neuroscience), psychological (cognition, affect), social (culture, context) levels, embracing all aspects of the human experience, from the functions of the brain to the actions of nations" (Dolan, 2025; Northoff & Ventura, 2025).

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Recognising both human and non-human: Many modern definitions maintain that psychology studies human and animal behaviour, cognitive processes, but interpret mental processes in light of neural, evolutionary, social mechanisms (Mischel, 2019).

### **FINAL SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

Evolution of the Definition of Psychology (18<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> Century)

The term *psychologia* first appeared in the early sixteenth century in the Latin writings of Marko Marulić and his contemporaries, denoting the study of the human soul within theological and philosophical contexts.

Subsequent scholars, such as Castellani and Schnell, began framing psychology as a bridge between physics and metaphysics, anticipating later naturalistic interpretations.

By the seventeenth century, psychology appeared in philosophical lexicons and medical treatises, gradually acquiring systematic meaning.

The eighteenth century marked a turning point with Christian Wolff's *Psychologia Empirica* and *Psychologia Rationalis*, which distinguished between empirical observation and rational analysis of mental phenomena.

By the late eighteenth century, Enlightenment thought and empirical philosophy initiated a conceptual shift from soul to mind. Immanuel Kant argued that empirical psychology could not qualify as a natural science due to the subjective and immeasurable nature of inner experience, a critique that nevertheless stimulated efforts toward methodological rigor.

In the nineteenth century, Wilhelm Wundt redefined psychology as the “science of immediate experience,” employing experimental methods to study conscious processes.

Later, William James broadened this scope by describing psychology as the “science of mental life,” integrating both consciousness and behavior within naturalistic and functional perspectives.

Collectively, these developments transformed psychology from a speculative philosophy into an empirical and experimental science.

*So, in summary:* by mid-/late 20<sup>th</sup> century psychology was typically defined as the scientific study of behaviour and mental processes, focusing on understanding, describing, predicting, and sometimes modifying behaviour and internal processes.

“Latest” definition: Psychology is the scientific discipline that seeks to understand how individuals (including humans and animals) think, feel, and act — in interaction with biological, psychological, and social-contextual influences. It employs empirical, theoretical, and interpretive methods to describe, explain, predict, and often improve behaviour and mental experience in context.

The evolution of psychology reflects humanity's enduring quest to understand the mind, consciousness, and behavior through progressively refined lenses. From the metaphysical reflections of Renaissance scholars to the experimental rigor of Wundt and James, the discipline's shifting definitions illustrate an expanding scientific vision rooted in

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philosophical inquiry. Continued historical and cross-cultural exploration will not only enrich our understanding of psychology's foundations but also strengthen its contemporary relevance as an integrative science bridging the humanities, biology, and cognitive research.

### **Research Gap**

Despite extensive historical scholarship tracing the evolution of psychology from its etymological and philosophical origins, significant gaps remain in understanding the cross-cultural and linguistic transmission of the term *psychologia* across European intellectual networks.

Most existing analyses focus on Western Latin sources, leaving the parallel developments in Arabic, Indian, and early modern Asian philosophical traditions underexplored.

Furthermore, while early scholars such as Marulić, Castellani, and Göckel established psychology's conceptual foundations, the influence of translation, manuscript circulation, and regional scholastic practices on shaping its meaning remains inadequately documented. Future research could integrate digital humanities tools, comparative philology, and archival analysis to reconstruct how "psychology" evolved as a scientific and cultural construct. Such interdisciplinary inquiry may provide deeper insight into how diverse intellectual traditions collectively shaped the discipline's transformation from metaphysical speculation to empirical science.

### **Future scope**

In recent years, psychology has begun to intersect with developments in Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Large Language Models (LLMs)—computer systems that use advanced algorithms to understand and generate human-like language. A recent study by Lin (2025) titled "From Prompts to Constructs: A Dual-Validity Framework for LLM Research in Psychology" (available as a preprint on arXiv website, discusses how these technologies can be used to explore psychological concepts such as thinking, emotion, and behavior. Although Lin's work does not focus directly on defining psychology, it highlights how the field is expanding to include new tools, methods, and constructs for studying the human mind. This development represents the latest stage in the evolution of psychology—from its early focus on the soul and consciousness to its current integration with data science and computational modelling.

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