

# Historical foundations in the field of psychology assignment

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Abstract This final assignment is a reflective paper in which the historical, philosophical, and empirical foundations of the field of learning in psychology and its applications will be discussed. Additionally, there will be a discussion of the ways that history has helped to shape important contemporary learning theories and issues.

Lastly, the paper will provide an explanation of how specific topics and information such as instrumental conditioning techniques and the usefulness of different learning styles may impact my personal and professional life and how the different aspects of the field of learning have added value to my body of knowledge as a student and future professional in the field of psychology. Historical Foundations Of the Field of Learning & Shaping Important Contemporary Issues It is a natural course of action for the field of learning to fall under the umbrella of the field of psychology.

A branch of philosophy and science, the field of learning, just as the field of psychology, was created through the movements of empiricism and rationalism, along with the development of evolution theory (Terry, 2009). These movements fostered interest in scientific investigation thus giving way to epistemology, which means, theory of knowledge. Questions concerning nature and nurture sparked interest in how we came to have knowledge, which is the main tenet of the field of learning (Terry, 2009).

In the field of psychology, the learning theories provide a way to explain how we learn and attain knowledge; how we think. While philosophers agreed with the basic definition of knowledge and learning, which is defined as the acquisition of knowledge, their opinions varied in how acquisition occurs

(Terry, 2009). Descartes suggested that although we learn, other sources of knowledge exist. He introduced the ideas of nativism and rationalism. He proposed that we have innate knowledge of our ideas of God, infinity, and perfecton (Terry, 2009).

Also, that other knowledge is derived by a reasoning, logical, and intuiting mind (Terry, 2009). Additioally, this knowledge is present and independent of particular experiences with the world (Terry, 2009). Therefore, he believed in the process of learning, but he didn't believe that all knowledge had to be learned. However, John Locke introduced the idea that knowledge is actually learned through our experiences, and through use of our senses, which is the idea of empiricism (Terry, 2009). This phenomenon is later known as cause and effect.

The ideas of Descartes and Locke influenced researchers toward an empirical view of learning through seeking out how knowledge is acquired through what is experienced in the environment. This gave way to the scientific methods of association learning, conditioning, and verbal learning (Terry, 2009). Each of the historical thoughts on learning is continuous and useful in some way today. There are modern theories that have built upon the ideas of conditioning and behavior modifications, etc. One such example is research conducted to treat anxiety disorders.

Mineka, and Zinbarg (2006), provide a modern approach to treating phobias, as well as other anxiety disorders. Their research starts with the traditional premise that what can be learned can be unlearned, and possibly prevented (Mineka ; Zinbarg, 2006). However, they support modern criticism that

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traditional learning approaches do not adequately account for the diverse factors involved in the origins of people's anxieties. To support this claim they provide an example of two clients with phobias of dogs.

The phobias were developed due to experiencing attacks by dogs. The first client actually was out walking her pet dog when she was attacked and later developed an infection due to the bite. However, the second client only experienced her clothes being torn before the owner was able to grab the dog before any serious injury occurred, although both clients developed phobias (Mineka & Zinbarg). They argue that traditional learning approaches do not adequately explain why the client that was not bitten developed the phobia as well.

Additionally, they provide another concern that traditional views do not explain why many individuals that have had traumatic experiences do not develop phobias. Furthermore, they go on to say that contemporary learning approaches are better grounded in the theories and methods of experimental psychology, and they provide more comprehensive formulations of the etiology of anxiety disorders. Also, that they provide a more explicit analysis of factors promoting or inhibiting the development of different anxiety disorders (Mineka & Zinbarg).

With that being said, there have indeed been great advancements in the field of learning and psychology, along with growing technological advances. Learning involves observable changes in behavior; objective evidence, and traditional researchers such as Pavlov, Watson and Skinner have paved the way for providing a scientific foundation for psychology and learning. “

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Psychology is a science because it is objective and quantifiable. Learning and memory themselves are not observed directly; they are processes that occur in the nervous system (Terry, pg. 5, 2009). Therefore, contemporary research has taken advantage of the use of PET scans and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) to look at brain functions to explain behaviors (Raichle, 1994). These modern avenues of research have allowed researchers to become a step closer to relating psychological theory to brain functions and research. For example, today's research may include brain scans and case studies of brain damaged soldiers. Even more so, recent research on post traumatic stress disorder examines the use of exposure therapy on preventing the reoccurrence of PTSD (Massad et. al, 2006). This research is most interesting because the researchers examine the understanding of reducing fear responses because associations with the stimuli are not unlearned. Their research concludes that unless exposure treatment regimens are maximized the risk of renewal of PTSD is high (Massad et. al, 2006). Such advances are very important to the quality of life that our existence depends upon. Knowledge is necessary for our daily lives even more so now than ever. This very research can be instrumental in a military soldiers life as we are currently in war time.

The topics in the field of learning that have had the most impact on me personally include learned taste aversions and the development of specific phobias. For example, the first time a child sees a nurse and a needle at the pediatrician's office, it probably will not cause the child to cry. However, through the pairing of the needle with the unpleasant sensation of having a vaccination the sight of the nurse may come to elicit symptoms of fear and

anxiety, even if the child is not receiving a vaccination. I personally found this interesting just because I am a mom and it is interesting to use such information while rearing children.

The second type of learning that I found interesting in the behaviorist tradition is instrumental or operant, conditioning. This type of learning requires that an organism operate on the environment to achieve a goal (Terry, 2009). So then, behaviors are learned as a function of the consequences of those behaviors. Of course, this type of reinforcement is useful in the classroom as well as rearing children. Additionally, social learning theory focuses on observational learning, and modeling. Social learning researchers are concerned with how expectations, memory, and awareness influence the learning process (Berk, 2008).

Children learn many behaviors through modeling. Most interesting to me was Albert Bandura's experiment with children. It is still shocking and relevant today. Adults can find this research useful when considering the consequences of behavior. References Berk, L. (2008). *Infants, children and adolescents*. (6th Edition). Boston: Allyn & Bacon. Raichle, M. (1994). Images of the mind: Studies with modern imaging techniques. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 45, 333-356. doi: 10.1146/annurev.ps.45.020194.002001. Terry, W. S. (2009). *Learning & memory: Basic principles, processes, and procedures*. (4th ed. ) Boston: Pearson Higher Education.