

# The main concepts of the behaviorist perspective theory



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As a reaction to the introspective analysis method in psychology and the focus on the study of mental processes, conscious or unconscious that dominated the beginning of the last century and was considered the object of psychology at that time[1], a new approach was developed under the name of behaviorism. This new psychotherapeutic approach was to dominate psychology for about 50 years. Precursors of this approach are the American psychologist Edward Lee Thorndike[2] and the Russian psychologist Ivan Pavlov[3], but the one who is considered “ the father of behaviorism” and established its theoretical and practical fundamentals is John Watson[4]. Behavior becomes the focus of psychological investigation because it is the only one that can be scientifically studied and quantified, predicted and controlled.

The behaviorist assumptions are that: psychology should be seen as a science and therefore it should deal with observable behaviors that generate empirical data; the environment plays a decisive role in determining behavior as opposed to the psychic inner processes; all behavior is learnt from environment and this learning process is similar to animals. In contrast with the vague concepts used by introspectionism, behaviorism places a high emphasis on the use of operational definitions - that is defining various concepts in terms of observable events - that may be used to describe human experience in terms of stimuli and responses. A specific characteristic of behaviorism is parsimony - “ seeking the simplest possible explanation for any event”[5].

Key concepts of behaviorism comprise the stimulus - response (S-R) equation, the classical and operant conditioning, and the reinforcement and

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punishment notions. The method used to analyze behavior is the lab experiment which gave the possibility to manipulate the independent variable in order to study the dependent variable. Stimulus is a measurable change in the environment - any object, fact, event or situation that may have an impact on behavior, while response is a measurable change in behavior - any reaction to a stimulus either environmental or mental. The behaviorist theory excludes thoughts, feelings and other mental occurrences, and genetic factors as well, that is everything that cannot be study objectively, in observable terms.

Watson took further Pavlov's idea of conditioning[6]and applied it to humans. According to him humans are born tabula rasa and the behavior is simply learnt from the environment through a process of conditioning. In a famous and controversial experiment because of its ethical implications, Watson and Rayner (1920) conditioned Little Albert an 18-months old toddler to develop a fear response to rats, by associating the rat - NS with a strong noise - UCS. They conducted their research following the classical conditioning scheme: Noise (UCS) - Anxiety (UCR); Noise (UCS) + Rat (NS) - Anxiety (UCR); Rat (CS) - Anxiety (CR)[7].

Close related to the process of classical conditioning is the generalization that occurs. Thus, stimuli similar to the original CS would tend to elicit the same CR. In the case of Little Albert it was reported that the boy was showing strong signs of anxiety to all fluffy objects, which were similar to the white rat used in experiment. " Stimulus generalization results in responding to a whole class of related stimuli, after initial learning with a single stimulus" and " can enable organisms to adapt better to their environment - <https://assignbuster.com/the-main-concepts-of-the-behaviorist-perspective-theory/>

though it may not always be adaptive"[8]. Behaviorists draw the conclusion that generalization is the first response of an organism when encountering new situations. Sometimes this generalization may take the form of stereotyping - that occurs when generalizing based on group membership. To "fight" this phenomenon, behaviorists undertook and exemplified through research the concept of stimulus discrimination[9], according to which an organism may be trained to discriminate between two or more stimuli that progressively increase in likeness. As Glassman and Haddad point out "stimulus discrimination always requires training - in the absence of such training, organisms tend to generalize" (emphasis theirs)[10].

Opposed to the concept of conditioning is the concept of extinction - which suggests that what can be learned can also be unlearned, and that a conditional response is not necessarily permanent[11]. However, as some research indicate[12], extinction is likely to appear in humans in some basic behaviors involving muscle responses like withdrawing from a hot surface, but not in complex behaviors which involve fear responses or other responses of the automatic nervous system and which are very hard to extinguish. Using Pavlov's extinction procedure, Watson and Rayner tried to eliminate the conditioned fear response associated with rats in Little Albert's case by presenting the rat for a period of three weeks without associating it with the gong's noise. Contrary to their expectation the fear did not extinguish. Stimulus generalization and discrimination concepts as well as the extinction principle have a great importance for our discussion because they will be used in the process of developing behavioral psychotherapeutic techniques.

Skinner developed the concept of operant conditioning. He argues that all behavior is modeled by complex reinforcement patterns from the environment. In his view, humans and animals actively engage with their environment, as opposed to the Watsonian emphasis on classical conditioning where they are more passive waiting for the environment to produce stimuli to which they may respond to. Skinner's main idea is that human behavior is determined by the consequences of its past behavior. If from a Watsonian perspective the behavior is triggered by external stimuli, starting with Skinner the behavior may be elicited by internal stimuli as well, as a result of past internalized experiences. Thus operant conditioning is a type of learning where future behavior is determined by the consequences of past behavior.

According to Skinner the past behavior may influence future behavior depending on three types of consequences: if it had no consequence, the probability of that behavior to occur in the future is neutral; if the consequence is found pleasant, then the behavior is likely to be repeated in the future - this was called positive reinforcement; if the consequence is negative, then it acts as a punishment and makes that specific behavior unlikely to appear in the future. By extrapolation, learning occurs through manipulation of positive reinforcements and punishments. Newer behaviorist approaches acknowledge that although the two types of conditioning - reflex and operant - were developed independent of each other by different researchers, they are interconnected and in real life situations both processes can occur simultaneously[13].

Practice - therapeutic process and methods

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The behavior therapeutic approach emerged from these behavioral principles of classical and operant conditioning. All behavior is learnt and therefore abnormal behavior is seen as the result of faulty learning. In order to cure the individual needs to learn the correct behavior. The behavioral therapy applying the principle of “ here and now” focuses on the present behavior which the patient finds problematic as opposed to the psychodynamic therapy that focuses on identifying and uncovering unconscious conflicts from childhood. The therapist sees the patient as standing at the intersection between genetic inheritance and learning that occurred through interaction between individual and environmental stimuli. These result in maladaptive thoughts, feelings, attitudes and verbal behavior.

Conventionally, the psychotherapeutic process starts by behavior analysis[14]. The focus is on indentifying the current stimulus - response relationship. Based on the disruptive behaviors identified the therapist designs a program (the psychotherapeutic process) meant to help the patient unlearn the faulty responses and if appropriate learn more adaptive behaviors. The patient is explained how the psychotherapy works, how the conditioned responses were learnt somewhere in the past and how the very same behavioral responses can be modified using the techniques of behavioral therapy.

According to Bennet, behavior therapy differs from psychoanalytic therapies in the following regards: it is directive, the therapist actively involves in the therapeutic process, using methods based on learning principles; the goal of therapy is different in that it intends to change behavior not to reconstruct <https://assignbuster.com/the-main-concepts-of-the-behaviorist-perspective-theory/>

personality; the therapy is shorter than other forms; the interventions are symptom – specific, closer to the medical model of intervention rather than the psychoanalytic catharsis or insight[15].

Behavioral techniques emerged from the classical conditioning principle involve systematic desensitisation, aversion therapy, implosion therapy and flooding. Operant conditioning techniques are related to what is commonly known in therapy as behavior modification, behavior shaping and token economy. Systematic desensitization – is the treatment of choice for phobias and various anxiety inducing behaviors. It aims at replacing the patient's anxiety response with a relaxation one, by increasingly exposing the patient to a hierarchy of stimuli from the less anxiety evoking to the anxiety evoking stimulus itself. During the process, the patient goes to the next stage of the stimulus hierarchy only after succeeding to be fully relaxed in the present of the previous stimulus. This method requires the training of the patient in relaxation techniques[16]and involves the use of imagination, since when is impossible to be confronted with the actual situation (like is the case in social phobias) the patient has to imagine being in those situations, following that life itself will offer opportunities to see if the therapy is successful or not. So, the exposure can be done in vitro or in vivo, depending on the phobic stimulus. However, studies have emphasized that the important factor in curing is the exposure to the feared object or situation by breaking the avoidance cycle created and reinforced in any phobia.

Aversion therapy – is used to induce an aversive response to stimuli which are associated with existing undesirable behaviors. It has been used in trying to treat alcoholic addiction, by associating a nausea producing drug or a <https://assignbuster.com/the-main-concepts-of-the-behaviorist-perspective-theory/>

small electric shock with the undesired behavior of drinking. As a result of this stimuli association, the patient is provoked to vomit. This supposedly might determine the patient avoid drinking in the future. However, this method raises serious ethical and effectiveness problems, the rates of relapse being reportedly very high.

Implosion therapy and flooding - involve that the patient has to face the worst possible fear producing situation, in imagination only in the former and in the physical context in the latter. In contrast with systematic desensitization which presupposes a gradual exposure to the stimuli, these techniques are more radical and less time consuming. If successful, the patient might be cured of a phobia in one hour. The advantage of this method is that the patient learns that there are no objective bases for his/her fear by accepting to openly confront it. Ethical problems are associated as well in regard to suffering from therapy.

Derived from operant conditioning, the behavior modification method is largely used in educational and clinical psychology contexts. It reinforces desired behaviors and ignores or punishes undesired ones. This techniques raises problems in choosing reinforcers since people can potentially respond to a wide range of such stimuli. Similar to behavior modification is the behavior shaping technique successfully used in working with autistic children in order to maintain a desired behavior. Another operant application has been used in institutions (for examples schools and hospitals) within the programs called token economies, where conditioned reinforcers are offered to strengthen specific behaviors. Tokens are offered in exchange of a desired behavior and can later be transformed in something that the individual

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wants. Token behave as a secondary reinforcement for the primary reinforcements which are in fact desired. It may be also used to extinguish undesired behaviors by taking away the earned tokens to punish undesired behavior. Taken economies are uncommon and inefficient in treating mental disorders, although they might contribute to alleviating some disruptive behaviors associated with mental disorders, such as aggressiveness, inadequate social interaction and use of bad language[17].

#### Evaluation of the approach - strengths and limits

One of the major strengths of this approach is questionably considered its scientific background. Developed from lab experiments on animals (Pavlov-dogs, Thorndike - cats, Watson - rats, Skinner - pigeons and rats) it focuses exclusively on behavior which can be observed and objectively measured. The behaviorist human being is concrete, realistic, determined in its actions by the environment and the society that he/she lives in. This theoretical approach proved to be productive in creating psychotherapeutic methods, mainly successful in the area of phobias and addictions. Compared to other approaches behaviorism is supported by many experiments.

However, there are discrepancies between the empirical and the theoretical developments in behaviorism, which is considered a limitation of the approach. Initial empirical studies were made on animals (as mentioned above) while the theoretical studies are done by generalizing observations made on animals upon humans. This fact cumulated with the declared behaviorists' rejection of the importance of mental processes offers a very fragmented and simplistic view of human being. Watson believed that

observing and describing behavior is enough to predict and control it. Thus, he eliminated explanation from psychology. Psychic life was acknowledged but its understanding was not considered necessary because it will finally manifest itself at behavioral level.

At this point we need to reconsider what meaning we give to the term scientific, in regard to our double perspective taken by the present work. If scientific means that positive methods in studying human being (similar to the study of rocks, animals, meteorological phenomena etc.) are favored, then we might as well consider this psychological approach a step forward on the terrain of positive science. But if scientific means to conceptualize the human being in all its wholeness in order to understand its starting point, its inner resorts and teleological direction, then behaviorism might be seen as an unacceptable lessening of the complexity and mystery of human being.

The intense use of lab experiments present the disadvantage of a low ecological validity[18]. In time it became obvious that understanding of behavior cannot come from the laboratory. On the other hand behaviorism was criticized as being reductionist by eliminating the meditational processes and too deterministic by the fact that human being is presented as not possessing free will. Another weakness identified by ethnological studies show that “ the principles of conditioning are not as universal as was once asserted”[19]. However, maybe the most informed criticism is provided from within, by a behavior therapist like Lazarus connected with Joseph Wolpe, who states in regard to behavior therapy that: “ the methods of behavior therapy are extremely effective when applied to carefully selected cases by informed practitioners. But when procedures overstep the

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boundaries of their legitimate terrain, ridicule and disparagement are most likely to ensue. Far from being a panacea, the methods are then held to have no merit whatsoever, and the proverbial baby gets thrown out with the bath water... The danger lies in a premature elevation of learning principles into unwarranted scientific truths[20].

### Comparison with psychodynamic perspective

Within the behaviorist approach various theorists hold positions that may vary in some degrees but fundamentally assert the same thing: behavior is the new found object of psychology; this allows psychology to behave and to be considered a natural science; a belief that it's legitimate to study the animal behavior and compare it with human behavior; the emphasis on environment as causation of behavior and consequently dismiss mental processes.

The psychodynamic and behaviorist perspectives on human being are opposed. They started from very different points in defining what human being is. Furthermore, the behaviorism appeared as a reaction to psychoanalysis and other currents in psychology that used the method of introspection to define and explain the inner, immaterial and unseen mental processes. Their approach was considered by behaviorists as “mysticism”. The focus in psychodynamic theories and practice is on inner processes that are seen as motivating and influencing behavior, while the focus in behaviorist theories and practice is on the outer world, i. e. environment that is seen as determining behavior. The change in psychoanalysis comes by uncovering unconscious conflicts that are the underlying causes of behavior,

while the change in behaviorism comes by manipulating the environment in order to remove undesirable behavior. These opposing perspectives do not completely eliminate dialogue since the unification point is the human being itself. For example, " if a Freudian theorist suggests that adult behavior can best be understood by looking at childhood experiences, Skinner agrees - but suggests that the connections are based on the reinforcement history of the person, not some vague concept of ' conflicts between id and ego"[21]. In the Freudian understanding of human nature, the person is born with instincts, hence the development of the drive and unconscious psychology, as opposed to the Watsonian perspective where humans are born tabula rasa. The behaviorist theorist Skinner describes the inner life as a " black box". He acknowledges its existence but he sees it in behaviorist terms. For him the private inner life is also behavior[22]. However, in the view of the major differences presented above we are enabled to draw the conclusion that psychoanalysis and behaviorism have as a starting point different assumptions concerning human nature and therefore, develop at the conceptual- theoretical and practical-therapeutic level towards two distinct finalities. This point is very well made clear by Watson in one of his famous quotes: "' Give me a dozen healthy infants, well-formed, and my own specified world to bring them up in and I'll guarantee to take anyone at random and train him to become any type of specialist I might select - doctor, lawyer, artist, merchant -chief and yes, even beggar-man and thief, regardless of his talents, penchants, tendencies, abilities, vocations, and race of his ancestors. I am going beyond my facts and I admit it, but so have the advocates of the contrary and they have been doing it for thousands of years"[23].

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## Contributions to new developments

Despite all its limitations, the behaviorist approach has some positive points as well: provided psychology with new and quantifiable concepts, opened the gate to new theories and explanations in psychology, created more realistic methods. Somehow ironically, one of the major contributions made by behaviorism concerns the possibilities of research opened towards the investigation of cognitive processes that they initially rejected, which will fundament the new cognitive approach in psychology. For example, “Edward Tolman, regarded as one of the founders of the cognitive approach, considered himself a behaviorist – though not a radical behaviorist like Skinner. In addition, the study of many cognitive issues, such as observational learning (imitation) and the use of hypotheses in problem solving, began with similar behaviorist studies of animals. Where the introspectionists failed in their attempts to make sense out of mental processes the behaviorists have pointed the way to new possibilities for a scientific psychology of the mind”[24].

Neobehaviorism introduces the mediational processes (motive, emotion) between stimuli and response.