

# Looking at behaviorism theory



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Psychology is the science of mind. Its goal is to study human behavior and to understand reason behind particular behavior (Carlson and Buskist, 1997).

In this essay I will discuss behaviorism theory and psychoanalytic theory. Followed by their relation to Nature and Nurture. It will also compare and contrast the theories and application of these theories to social work practice.

### **Behaviorism Theory:**

Behaviorism theory sees personality as a product of learning. It can result from many small events a child receives or through a complex social behavior (Hayes, 1994).

Thorndike studied the relation between response and outcome. Response that brought satisfaction was repeated to achieve same outcome this was called “the law of effect” (Carlson and Buskist, 1997). Watson saw child’s mind as a blank state which had nothing on it, but child with his own experiences write on it and make one’s personality (Hayes, 1994).

Skinner did not believe in any internal self. He saw learning to occur through law of effect and viewed personality as a product of a behavioral response to environmental stimuli (Hayes, 1994).

### **Psychoanalytic Theory:**

According to Freud personality comprises of id, the ego and the superego. At birth child has some personality. It is the unconscious part of personality termed the id. The ego is the part of personality that develops due to contact

with reality and the super ego is an individual's moral code of right and wrong (Corey, 2009).

Freud also believed that libido is a determinant of personality. Every individual goes through six stages of psychosexual learning at early childhood which are oral, anal, phallic, and genital and latency stage (Carlson and Buskist, 1997).

### **Nature and Nurture:**

Nature versus Nurture controversy has been debated in psychology for long time. As per nature factors such as genes, brain influence an individual's personality whereas nurture is the influence of society, learning culture on the development of personality (Hayes, 1994).

The Behaviorism theory views personality as a result of an individual's responses to which if brought satisfaction was repeated. Personality is primarily shaped by nurture, providing correct environment to a child and young adult. Watson and BF Skinner viewed internal self as blank, the input from the environment and output from an individual's response was what formed personality. The learning in a child's life happens through the law effect given by Thorndike (Hayes, 1994).

Nature plays no role in the shaping of personality as per behaviorism theories. Personality is a by-product of actions repeated to get desired outcome which becomes behavior. Pavlov conducted experiment on dog salivating for food demonstrated that once he learns he gains the ability to recognize stimuli, he also then learn to make appropriate response quickly

(Carlson and Buskit, 1997). Behaviorism is all based on learning through environment and not through inheritance.

The psychoanalytic theory emphasis more on nurture than nature. The three components of adult personality the id, the ego and the super ego are based on individuals experience with the world. A child is born with an id which is the unconscious part of personality. Even though the id as explained by Freud is the pleasure principle where every need should be fulfilled immediately (Hayes, 1994). But I believe it to be influenced by nature to some extent. At birth our genes play a role in our primitive personality which then with the real world experience is determined with the ego and the superego which is based on nurture. The six stage of development given by Freud that shape a child's personality are based on child's experiences and traumas as the determinants of an individual's personality.

### **Compare and Contrast of the theories:**

Behaviorism theory was proposed by JB Watson in 1913. Watson argued that because it is impossible to study mind, observation of behavior verbal or specific would produce objective theory of psychology (Hayes, 1994).

Personality is outcome of stimuli and response to it. BF Skinner followed the same theory and he saw behavior comprised of actions that brought positive consequences. (Nye, 1979).

Psychoanalytic theory was proposed by Sigmund Freud who based this theory on the id, the ego and the superego as discussed previously. He also gave six stages that develop in early childhood.

Behaviorism theory and Psychoanalytic theory both view personality as a product of individual's experiences. These theories deny the influence of nature on personality

Behaviorist Watson stated child's mind as a blank state which was written on by its experiences. The three term contingency by Skinner is the relationship between event, response and favorable consequence. Learning occurs through reward and punishment (Carlson and Buskist, 1997). It occurs in conscious state of mind.

Psychological functioning mostly happens in unconscious state of mind. As per Freud conscious part of mind was limited and large part of mind was unconscious state, similar to an ice berg where larger part is below water and is unaware like unconscious mind (Corey, 2009).

Behaviorism theory disregards notion of unconscious state of mind where as psychoanalytic theory considers unconscious state of mind as a determinant of behavior.

### **Application of theory in social work practice:**

Social work is a profession with its own knowledge base and practical skills. Social workers practice to reduce the effect of inequalities, injustice on an individual or society. To do so they need to have unique understanding of individuals own thoughts, feelings, behavior, interaction with others and society (Alston and Mckinnon, 2001).

Theories of psychology provide knowledge related to human development, personality, family system, socialization, and organizational functioning.

Understanding people in context to their environment and assessing them is an important part of social work practice and is challenging (Alston and Mckinnon, 2001).

Theories provide social workers with knowledge base to understand individuals and their environment.

### **Behaviorism theory:**

In social work practice behaviorism theory explains the three contingency. In social work practice behaviorism theory is used to understand troublesome ways of behaving. It is used to identify the cause of particular behavior and also to guide family the use of reinforcement of good behavior and use of punishment to eliminate bad behavior.

### **Psychoanalytic theory:**

Psychoanalytic theory focuses on behavior resulting from unconscious state of mind. Through this theory social worker can understand an individual's thoughts and feeling resulting in particular behavior and help them to eliminate that behavior. It gives more attention to client's thoughts and feelings rather than its environment.

### **Social work practice in mental health:**

Social work practice in mental health is to restore on individuals well being in its family and society. Its purpose is to promote clients control in their own lives. Individuals suffering mental illness are struggling with issue such as illness, personality conflict vulnerability, family functioning, substance abuse and external factors (Alston and Mckinnon, 2001).

**Behaviorism Theory:**

As discussed previously behaviorism theory claims that actions that create positive reinforcement are continued and become behavior of an individual. In regards to social work practice relevant to mental illness, behaviorism theory enables social worker to understand clients showing harmful behaviors. It enables social work to understand the cause and initiate a change in such behavior. The goal is to increase clients engagement in positive activities. Techniques such as role playing, Behavioral modification, self monitoring can be used. (Herkov, 2012).

**Psychoanalytic theory:**

According to psychoanalytic theory every individual personality is shaped according to the experience and traumas they face in six stages of development during early childhood. In relation to mental health social workers can apply this theory to create self awareness in clients and to make them understand the influence of their troublesome past on their present.

Research has shown that mental distress is in majority of people who faces psychological invasions such as sexual or emotional abuse at time when they are vulnerable (Tew, 2005).

Freud psychoanalytic theory gives foundation knowledge to understand relation between unconscious mind and experiences on personality.

Examining the clients unresolved conflicts and symbols that arise from past dysfunctional relationships social workers can initiate self awareness in the clients.

**Conclusion:**

Many psychological theories explain the personality formation. Most theories believe that nurture shapes an individual's personality rather than nature, which few psychologists believe. Nature versus nurture component has been a controversial equation in psychology.

Psychologist like JB Watson BF Skinner proposed and explained behaviorism theory, discard the notion of unconscious mind. The law of effect proposed by Thordike is the foundation of this theory which was then in future studied in relation to the term the three contingency, where responses to consequence from parents, teachers, and society decided if it was repeated again and become behavior.

The psychoanalytic theory whose founder Sigmund Freud consider behavior as by-product of unconscious state of mind and experience during the six stages of development in early childhood. He also proposed the role of the id, the ego and the superego in personality.

Social workers practice in a variety of settings and deal with clients of all ages gender, race, disabilities and inequalities. Psychological theories provide a foundation to understand personalities and behavior in relation to nature and nurture. They provide a unique guidance to understand client's relation with his inner self with others.