

Role of behavioural theory for addiction studies



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" Psychology as the behaviorist views it is a purely objective experimental branch of natural science. Its theoretical goal is the prediction and control of behavior ." (Watson, 1913)

In this essay, I will briefly outline the behavioural perspective in Psychology, by referring to key theorists who have published finding and studies on behaviourism. I will critically outline how a knowledge of behavioural techniques could be of help in a specific social care setting, nmely for people with addictions.

Behavioural Psychology or behaviourism is a theory of learning based on the idea that all behaviours are acquired through conditioning. It is focused on observable and overt behaviours that are learned from our environment. The developments of behaviourism came about by the work of Ivan Pavlov, John B. Watson, B. F. Skinner and Edward Lee Thorndike (Lumen Learning, n. d.).

Ivan Pavlov, a Russian Physiologist discovered Classical conditioning while carrying out a study on a dog's physiological response to food. He found that the dog made an unconscious reflexive response when presented with the food, rather than response made of consciousness. He found that the salivation reflex could be elicited using a second stimulus, which in his experiment was of sound (bell). After several times ringing the bell with the presence of food, Pavlov found that ringing the bell alone triggered the salivary response. This experiment of conditioned response is considered the basic building block of learning and associative learning (Malone, 2018). In modern times, an example of this classical conditioning can be seen with the population's addiction to smartphones. We use our smartphones as a

gateway to meet our psychological, autonomy and competence needs and we have come to be in a state of continuous partial attention to them and the world around us. The sound of a smartphone ringing shows a classical conditioned response as each person reacts to the certain sound made. For example, if a smartphone rings in a crowded room and it has the same ringtone as ours, we have an unconscious response to check our phones immediately regardless of the situation in the room (Brooks, 2017) .

Although this contemporary behaviour is a conditioned response, Pavlov's work demonstrated that what is learned can be unlearned.

There are different types of behavioural concepts, which enable or hinder conditioned response. Firstly, Generalization, shows that response as learned will be evident in similar circumstances. Secondly, Discrimination, opposite to generalization where similar responses maybe given in some circumstances but not in different similar circumstances. The final concept, Extinction, shows that a response learned in one circumstance may not be repeated in different circumstances. Interestingly, Spontaneous recovery will show a response which was extinguished, will reappear after a prolonged period of time (Siegel, 2017).

John B. Watson was an American psychologist who furthered Pavlov's work and focused on the theory that human behaviours cannot be studied by the analysis of the mind. He focused on the directly observable behaviour and the notion that human behaviour can be controlled. His work used animals to experiment on, as it was believed that animals exert very similar behaviours to humans. He shifted the work of psychology from the viewpoints of the mind to the facts of behaviour. The approach of observing and controlling

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behaviour became known as behaviourism (Watson, 1913). Establishing psychology as a scientific discipline is largely due to behaviourism objective methods and experimentation. It is used in therapies, which are popular in our society such as behavioural and cognitive behavioural therapy.

It was an American psychologist, Thorndike who came up with the theory that behaviour is predictable. He used his study on animals, like Watson, who believed that animals display similar behaviours as humans. His paper, "Animal Intelligence" announced a new law of learning. In this paper, Thorndike composed the Law of Effect which stated, "*Of several responses made to the same situation, those which are accompanied or closely followed by satisfaction to the animal will, other things being equal, ...will be more likely to recur; those which are accompanied or closely followed by discomfort to the animal will, other things being equal, have their connections with that situation weakened, so that, when it recurs, they will be less likely to occur. The greater the satisfaction or discomfort, the greater the strengthening or weakening of the bond*". He also established the Law of Exercise that stated, "*Any response to a situation will, other things being equal, be more strongly connected with the situation in proportion to the number of times it has been connected with that situation and to the average vigor and duration of the connections*" (Thorndike, 1911) . The responses, which receive desired results, are more likely to be repeated.

Skinner, like Watson was also a behaviourist who focused his studies on behaviour and the consequences of behaviour. He developed the operant conditioning chamber, or the "Skinner Box" that studied rat's behaviours and the negative and positive results of certain behaviours. His work found

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that reinforcement and punishment are major factors in driving behaviour. His work of how positive and negative reinforcement of learned behaviours had a lasting impact on psychology (Lumen Learning, n. d.). Positive and negative reinforcement is widely used in everyday life. It is evident through childhood into adulthood. In the classroom, a teacher may use rewarding system for when a child has completed their homework correctly, such as a gold star sticker. If negative behaviour is portrayed repeatedly in this setting, e. g. a student being late on a number of occasions, the student may receive lunchtime or after school detention. In the work place, employers may use financial bonuses or offer raises for excellent work performance for a continued period of time. In Ireland, there are speed limits on each road, if a person is found speeding and incurs penalty points, which rises the cost of insurance, the person, will learn to obey speed limits to not incur more significant charges. Continued positive reinforcement will motivate a person to continue to behave in the certain way while punishment inhibits the “ bad behaviour”.

For the purpose of this essay, I am outlining how a knowledge of behavioural techniques could be of help to people who suffer with chemical addiction. In Ireland today, our drinking culture has brought serious problems to our health and attitude towards alcohol has had serious effect. A study done in 2017 showed thirty-nine percent of Irish adults binge drink on regular occasion compared to a worldwide average of sixteen percent (Quinlan, 2017).

Addiction is a chronic disease, which starts voluntarily for the majority of people who are drug and alcohol dependent. It is compulsive and repetitive

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despite knowledge that is harmful to users. It is an uncontrollable and overwhelming need to take a drug. Repeated use and abuse of certain drugs can challenge the brain's ability to self-control and resist urges to take drugs. These brain changes can be persistent and can cause a person who suffers with addiction to relapse even after years of abstaining from the drug (National Institute of Drug Abuse, 2018). Serious chemical addiction is a psychological condition, which can be developed from street drugs, prescription medication and over indulgent in alcohol. The drug stimulates pleasure and motivation centres, which are normally triggered by eating, having sex, spending time with friends, in the brain more strongly than any natural rewards. Repeated drug use tricks the brain into prioritizing drugs over regular human rewards and contact. People who have addictions generally display two elements; they cannot cease or limit substance use and display an irresistible urge to continue taking and seeking the drug. This happens despite the known consequences and dangers. For example, a person who has become alcohol dependent may stop on the way home from work for one pint but will find themselves still in the pub hours later. This becomes more frequent and excessive and is unlikely to stop on its own despite the person losing his job or being caught driving under the influence. It is almost impossible for a person who is suffering from addiction to recover without medical treatment, behavioural counselling and long-term support (MacLauren, 2016).

Behavioural techniques play an important part in addiction treatment. The different types of behaviourism explained in this essay can be seen in a variety of different treatment methods. An understanding of Pavlov's

Classical Conditioning is important when supporting people who are using cue exposure therapy. The “ cues” are the places or objects the person associates with their addiction as the stimuli or relapse triggers. If a person who is recovering from alcohol dependency passed their local pub each day on the way home, seeing this pub would be their relapse trigger. This is the same as the bell for Pavlov’s dog. The pub creates a powerful craving and could result in the person experiencing a relapse. A Social Care worker could encourage the person to repeatedly pass the pub. Eventually, once the person has passed the pub on a number of occasions, the pub would be disassociated with the person and they would be able to pass it without getting cravings for alcohol. The stimulus or cue would be extinguished. The learned behaviour becomes unlearned. Another example of Pavlov’s classical conditioning is in aversion therapy. This requires pairing negative behaviour with an unpleasant experience. Without this behaviour, an alcohol dependent person may associate alcohol with feelings of positivity. A drug can be administered to a person which nauseates them when they consume alcohol. After the therapy, most people will associate alcohol with nausea instead of positive feelings. This aversion therapy has been proven to wear off after a couple of months so it is important as a Social Care Worker to be able to understand and support the person and help them to enjoy their life alcohol free (Horvath, et al., 2015).

A substance can only become addictive if it is rewarding. It has to have pleasurable or enjoyable effects on the person. If a person does not enjoy their experience, they will not become addicted. Addiction is learned behaviour as the initial pleasure or enjoyment is rewarding or more

worryingly immediately rewarding (Horvath, et al., 2015). Drug and alcohol abuse are learned responses that exhibit their own consequences. This is referred to as operant behaviour. The person controls the use of the drug by the unconditioned immediate positive reinforcement. Such as the psychedelic effect or the pharmaceutical effect the drug may have, controlled positive reinforcement in a social aspect such as a group of friends who also use drugs and the negative reinforcements can be seen with withdrawal affects and negative adverse events in the social setting (Queiroz, et al., 2015). Using good health only as a reward is challenging because it has a delayed effect. Punishment or a negative is key in the early stage of addiction such as a health implication or being arrested by the Gardaí as it can stop the learned negative behaviour. Operant conditioning is effective as a treatment for the addiction. It rewards addicts for making healthier life choices (Horvath, et al., 2015). A Social Care worker can support people with addiction in a number of ways. The worker may be able to set up a rewards programme in which every number of weeks they abstain from the drug they may receive a medal or certificate. If the person relapses, they must start the programme over again. Social care workers may also be able to support family members with ideas about how to reward the person for portraying healthy behaviour and punishment for bad behaviour. This could be as simple as rewarding a teenager with a family night out bowling for abstaining and continuing in education.

In this essay, I have briefly outlined the behavioural perspective in Psychology. I will critically outline how a knowledge of behavioural

techniques could be of help in a social care setting regarding people suffering from addiction.

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