

# [History and current applications of behaviorist theory](https://assignbuster.com/history-and-current-applications-of-behaviorist-theory/)

Behaviorism is a theory of learning. Behaviorism proposes that learning is based on the thought that all behaviors are gained when they are conditioned. The theory of behaviorism supposes that behavior can be studied in a controlled manner and according to John B. Watson we can observe it and it should have nothing to do with introspection because introspection is too subjective (Goodwin, 2008). Beside’s John B. Watson there were others also interested in the study of behavior, specifically, Ivan Pavlov and Burrhus F Skinner. Behaviorism was a major change from earlier views because it discarded the importance of the conscious and unconscious mind and instead it attempted to make psychology a more scientific field, by focusing just on the observable behavior. Behaviorism had its earliest start with the work of Ivan Pavlov’s and his research on the digestive systems of dogs that led him to the discovery of classical conditioning process, which demonstrated that behaviors could be learned through conditioned associations (Goodwin, 2008). This paper will discuss the work of Pavlov, Watson and Skinner and how they contributed to today’s behaviorist theories like cognitive behavioral therapy. It will also discuss how these early behaviorists’ theories are the same as today’s behaviorist theories and how they are different.

The History and Current applications of Behaviorist Theory

Behavioral psychology otherwise known as behaviorism is a theory of learning based upon the idea that all our behaviors are gained via conditioning. Conditioning occurs through our interactions with our surroundings. Behaviorism proposes that behavior can be studied in an organized and observable way without consideration or thought of inner psychological conditions (Goodwin, 2008). There are two major types of conditioning in behaviorism, classical conditioning and operant conditioning. When you take a natural occurring stimulus and then pair it with a response a behaviorist calls this classical conditioning and is a technique used in behavioral training. It involves taking a neutral stimulus (i. e. the ringing of a bell) and then pairing it with a naturally occurring stimulus (i. e. dogs salivate when presented with food). Continuing this pairing will inevitably cause the neutral stimulus, that was formerly introduced to create the response without the introduction of the naturally occurring stimulus (i. e. the dog will salivate with the ringing of the bell even when food is not immediately presented). The two components are then called the conditioned stimulus (the ring of the bell) and the conditioned response (the dog salivating) (Todes, 2002). Operant conditioning is the idea that learning occurs because rewards and/or punishments are consequences for behavior. With operant conditioning, a relationship is created linking a behavior and a consequence for that behavior (Skinner, 1954). Ivan Pavlov, John B. Watson and Burrhus F. Skinner all developed significant contributions to the advancement of behaviorism. While Pavlov, Watson and Skinner paved the way for behaviorist thinking, what is left of their findings? If we take a critical look at cognitive behavioral therapy we can see how the early behaviorists’ ideas are still alive today and how these ideas have changed with time.

In the late 1800s, Pavlov was studying the gastric function of dogs. Pavlov inadvertently discovered that dogs would salivate prior to the food being presented to them, and decided that his discovery of dogs salivating prior to the actual food arriving was more interesting than gastric functions, and changed the focus of his research (Goodwin, 2008). Pavlov experimented using a tone for dogs alerting them that food was available. What Pavlov found was that his dogs began to salivate when the tone was introduced even when the food was not readily available (Schwartz & Lacy, 1982). Pavlov realized that when his dogs salivated at the sound of the tone, this response is not a natural response but instead it was a learned response, and he consequently called this response a conditioned response and the neutral stimulus (presentation of the food) became a conditioned stimulus (Beecroft, 1966). Pavlov’s work became known in the West, mainly due to the writings of John B. Watson. Pavlov thus coined what we now know today as classical conditioning. Pavlov’s research also had a direct affect on bringing behaviorism to the attention of the American public in the 1930’s.

John B. Watson is known as the “ founder of behaviorism” however Watsons Behaviorism did not catch on immediately and in 1913 when he publicized his “ Behaviorist Manifesto”,  he was initially met with a lot of criticism and doubt (Goodwin, 2008). It was not until the early 1930’s when behaviorism began to catch the attention of America, in part due to Watsons continued push on the public to recognize it as a valid theory in psychology. Finally after several articles were published citing the use of behaviorism as a way to improve lives, the public began to recognize behaviorism as a positive, meaning it could help to raise children more efficiently, improve marriages, improve business and overall help people to lead more productive lives (Goodwin, 2008). With Watson’s book, “ Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It,” behaviorism for the first time was given well defined goals, methods and thought (Goodwin, 2008).  Watson made behaviorism a discipline that created a structure based heavily on the principle that learning is the key to development and behavior (Rilling, 2000).  In 1927, Watson and his then assistant, Rayner conducted a study that produced an intense fear of rats in a 9 month old boy they called “ little Albert”. When “ little Albert” reached for a white rat, Watson would make a loud noise that scared “ little Albert”. What occurred in “ little” Albert is what is known as classical conditioning. When “ Little Albert” heard the load noise at the same time as seeing the whit rat he made an association between the two. “ Little” Albert then shifted his fear with the noise to a fear of rats. In addition to classical conditioning, second order conditioning occurred as “ Little Albert” then associated rats, which have fur, to all things with fur (Goodwin, 2008). Because of this “ second order conditioning”, “ little Albert” then believed all things with fur would produce a “ scary” noise and he became afraid of all things that had fur (Mischel, 1993). Although Watson was asked to leave John Hopkins and essentially could no longer work in academia he continued to promote his belief in behaviorism until it finally caught the attention of the American public. The impact of behaviorism was huge, and was a school of thought that continued to dominate psychology for the next fifty years.

Psychologist B. F Skinner advanced the behaviorist perspective with his theory of operant conditioning. Operant conditioning verified the effect of punishment and positive reinforcement on behavior. There are two factors in operant conditioning, the response and the consequence (Skinner, 1954). If the consequence is positively reinforcing, then there is the likelihood of getting a similar response. If the consequence is punishing the likelihood of repeating the response is not probable (Mischel, 1993). Skinner conducted an experiment known as the skinner- box (Goodwin, 2008). In Skinner’s experiment a rat would press a lever and the lever produced a piece of food which consequently taught the rat that if it pressed the lever it would get “ positively reinforced” with a piece of food (Skinner, 1954). Skinner also produced separate results when he replaced the pushing of the lever with the consequence of a shock. When the rats pushed the lever and received a shock they almost immediately stopped pressing the lever (Skinner, 1954). Skinner also realized that if he stopped presenting food ( in a process called extinction) eventually the rat would stop pressing the lever as well but not as quickly as when a shock was received thus, proving that punishment was a greater deterrent to the behavior (Goodwin, 2008). When operant conditioning is used using the reward and punishment techniques as described in Skinners experiment, the same behaviors can be produced in a child (Schwartz, 1982).

During 1950 to 1970 cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) became widely utilized and was inspired by the behaviorist learning theories of Ivan Pavlov, John B. Watson and Clark L. Hull (Rachman, 1997). In the United States, psychologists were using B. F. Skinners behaviorism and applying it to clinical work and much of this work was focused towards severe, chronic psychiatric disorders such as psychotic behavior and autism (Rachman, 1997). The therapeutic approaches of Albert Ellis and Aaron T. Beck gained popularity among behavior therapists. These systems included behavioral elements and interventions that focused primarily on problems in the present. Ellis’s system began in the early 1950’s and was called rational therapy and is one of the first forms of CBT. (Ellis, 1975). Aaron T. Beck developed cognitive therapy in 1960 after being inspired by Ellis’s work and Beck’s cognitive therapy became a favorite intervention technique to study in the psychotherapy research in academic settings. Initial research focused on comparing this cognitive therapy with behavioral therapy’s to see which was more effective (Beck, 1975). During the 1980’s and 1990’s cognitive and behavioral therapy’s were officially merged into what we now know as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) (Rachman, 1997). Samuel Yochelson and Stanton Samenow introduced the idea that CBT approaches can be used successfully with the criminal population (Yochelson and Samenow, 1976).

In conclusion, because behaviorism is based upon behaviors we can actually observe, it becomes much easier when performing research, to measure and collect data. Effective therapeutic techniques such as intensive behavioral intervention, rational therapy and CBT all get there beginnings from behaviorism. CBT, rational therapy and behavioral interventions are all useful approaches for changing harmful or maladaptive behaviors in children and adults. Some differences between today’s CBT and behaviorism is that behaviorism is to basic of an approach to behavior and it does not take into account an individual’s choice of free will or any internal stimulus such as a person’s moods, thoughts, and feelings. Another criticism is that behaviorism does not take into consideration the fact that there are other forms of learning, such as the learning that can occur even when reinforcements or punishments are not introduced (Swartz and Lacey, 1982). Finally, behaviorism does not look at the fact that people are able to adapt behavior when new information is present, whether or not the initial behavior was established through reinforcement. Behaviorism without the addition of cognitive influences is not enough. When we can get an understanding of the thinking behind the behavior we have a better chance at changing it. In the words of Stan Samenow “ change the errors in thinking and we can change the behavior” (Yochelson and Samenow, 1976).