

Behaviourist Approach

(Also known as the Learning Theory)

Background

This approach in Psychology supports the nurture debate which believes that all behaviour is learned through experiences and emphasises the role of the environment in influencing our behaviour. This idea founded by **John Watson** looks at observable behaviour and uses methods such as laboratory experiments to investigate cause and effect. It claims that observable behaviour can be objectively measured through the control over variables particularly in artificial environments. Research in this approach focuses on human behaviour but can be carried out on animals as well as humans.





The behaviourist approach is based on the idea that when we are born our mind is a 'tabula rasa' (a blank slate) and all behaviour is acquired through conditioning. Conditioning occurs through interaction with the environment, with our behaviour being shaped by our responses to certain stimuli.

Evidence

In 1913 **John Watson** wrote an article entitled 'Psychology as the behaviourist views it,' which set out a number of underlying assumptions leading to the beginning of this area of Psychology. He suggested that theories need to be supported by empirical evidence obtained through careful and controlled observation and measurement of behaviour. While behaviourists often accept the existence of cognitions and emotions, they prefer not to study them.

Edward Thorndike (1905) introduced the concept of reinforcement and was the first to apply psychological principles to the area of learning. His research led to many theories and laws of learning, such as operant conditioning. His 'Law of Effect' stated that any behaviour that is followed by pleasant consequences is likely to be repeated, and any behaviour followed by unpleasant consequences is likely to cease.

Evaluation

-  The behaviourist approach has many useful applications as it gives us an insight into the external, environmental influences which may impact a person's behaviour. Many of the explanations can be scientifically tested and are supported with evidence suggesting they are objective.
-  As many of the supporting studies are carried out under controlled conditions in the laboratory, the research evidence gathered is more likely to be reliable. However, this does mean the findings may lack ecological validity due to the artificial nature of the setting.
-  This approach does not account for the nature debate which claims that biological influences may play a larger role in determining our behaviour.
-  There are also issues with generalisation particularly when discussing the findings of animal studies.

