

# PSYCHOPATHOLOGY: PHOBIAS

## Outline and evaluate the behavioural approach to explaining phobias

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According to the behavioural explanation phobias can be developed by either classical conditioning or operant conditioning. **Mowrer (1947)** put forward a two-process model, to explain how phobias are learned through classical conditioning and maintained through operant conditioning. According to classical conditioning, phobias can be acquired through the process of learning by association. This idea was discovered by **Pavlov (1903)** in his work with dogs, using the stimulus-response theory. This suggests that an unconditioned stimulus creates an unconditioned response. This is paired with an artificial neutral stimulus through association becoming a conditioned stimulus, creating a conditioned response.

Research support comes from **Watson & Raynor (1920)** who conducted a laboratory experiment to examine whether a fear response could be learned through classical conditioning, in humans. They studied an 11-month-old boy called 'Little Albert' and demonstrated that a fear response could be induced through the process of classical conditioning. They conditioned him to be afraid of white rats; when the UCS (noise) created a UCR (fear) and this was paired with a NS (rat) creating a CR (fear). Additional supporting evidence comes from **Ad De Jongh et al (2006)** who confirms that associations cause phobias to develop. They found 73% of people with a fear of dentistry have experienced a traumatic experience. However, not all phobias are developed from negative experiences, as evolutionary theorists argue that we are biologically preprogrammed to fear some things in life. This is called preparedness.

Most phobias are long-term and according to **Mowrer** and are maintained through operant conditioning. Operant conditioning takes place when our behaviour is reinforced or punished. According to operant conditioning phobias can be negatively reinforced. This is where a behaviour is strengthened, because an unpleasant consequence is removed. For example, if someone is afraid of spiders and one appears in their room, they would either leave the room or ask another person to remove the spider. If someone is avoiding the phobic stimulus, they do not deal with the fear, just enable (reinforce) it to continue. This maintains the phobia over time.

The behaviourist explanation has been criticised for being reductionist and overly simplistic. It ignores the role of cognition/ thinking and some psychologists suggest that phobias may develop as a result of irrational thinking, not just learning. For example, people hold irrational beliefs about the phobic stimulus, such as thinking a spider is dangerous when typically in the UK, they are mostly harmless. This explanation focuses on the nurture debate and fails to account for biological influences as described by evolutionary theorists. However, one positive practical application of the behavioural explanation of phobias is that behavioural treatments such as systematic desensitisation are effective for reconditioning people who suffer from phobias. **McGrath et al (1990)** found that 75% of patients with phobias were successfully treated using systematic desensitisation.

This explanation shows that **Mowrer** has a plausible idea based on the two-process model in that phobias are learned through classical conditioning and maintained through operant conditioning.

