



The behaviourist approach to psychology

This Factsheet summarises the assumptions of the behaviourist approach and its strengths and weaknesses. It also covers the research methods used, relevant debates, plus some applications and key studies. Terms in bold are explained in the glossary.

Exam Hint: The examiners comment that “knowledge and understanding of the actual psychological approaches are frequently quite weak.” Make sure that you know them well!

What is the behaviourist approach to psychology?

- In 1913, John Watson (of ‘Little Albert’ fame) founded the behaviourist approach by setting out its main assumptions in an article in the journal *Psychological Review*.
- John Watson stated in his article that “Psychology as the behaviourist views it is a purely **objective** experimental branch of natural science. Its theoretical goal is the prediction and control of behaviour. **Introspection** forms no essential part of its methods...” (Watson, 1913)
- Behaviourism dominated psychology until the 1950s when cognitive psychology began to take precedence.
- More recently ‘neo-behaviourism’ has taken cognitive processes into account and has developed social learning theory.
- The behaviourist approach has several names; it is also known as behavioural psychology, learning theory or the learning approach!

Exam Hint: The behaviourist approach relates to many different topics which you will study in your course. For example, behaviourism is used to explain how we learn aggressive behaviour and how we become attached to a caregiver. In the exam, you should be able to refer to the behaviourist approach in relation to other topics.

Its main assumptions

- All of our behaviour is learnt through experience in the environment after birth.
- We are all born as a blank slate (tabula rasa).
- When studying behaviour, the focus should be on the laws of learning (conditioning).
- We should study behaviour only in terms of what we can observe.
- The laws of learning are universal, applying the same to both non-human animals and humans.
- Behaviourism considers that we learn all of our behaviour through:
 - Classical conditioning = by associating one thing with another.
 - Operant conditioning = by the consequences of what we do.
 - Social learning theory = by observing and imitating others.



1. Make sure that you know these types of learning very well and can explain them clearly. You need to know all of the key terms involved. Typical examiners’ comments include:

- Vicarious reinforcement and negative reinforcement were poorly understood.
- There is real misunderstanding about the way in which classical conditioning works.
- Candidates do not understand the difference between negative reinforcement and punishment.

2. Classical conditioning is described and evaluated in Factsheet number 55. Operant conditioning is described and evaluate in Factsheet number 17.

Exam Hint: If an exam question presents a scenario or example of behaviour, make sure that you apply your knowledge of behaviourism to the scenario. Try not to give a set answer which does not apply directly to the question.

Methodology

- Behaviourism takes a very scientific approach to studying behaviour. It largely uses laboratory experiments, often using non-human animals.
- The strengths and weaknesses of the experimental method can be applied when discussing such behavioural studies. For example, experimental methods have the advantages of being able to strictly control variables and cause and effect between variables can be inferred. However, they have the disadvantages of lacking ecological validity if done in a laboratory and the participants may not behave naturally as they are aware of being studied.
- It is also debated just how much non-human animal behaviour can tell us about human behaviour.



Relation to debates

Some debates which are relevant to behaviourism include:

- The nature-nurture debate: behaviourism believes that we learn everything, falling completely on the nurture side of the debate.
- The freewill versus determinism debate: behaviourism takes an extreme view as it believes that we learn all behaviour from the environment and that freewill is an illusion.
- Reductionism: behaviourism assumes that complex behaviour is the sum of all past learning.

Exam hint: Make sure that you know what these debates are and can explain how they relate to behaviourism.

Exam hint: Can you compare approaches? For example, can you compare how the humanistic and behaviourist approaches view the concept of freewill? You may be asked to do this in the exam.

Strengths and weaknesses of the behaviourist approach

Table 1: Evaluating the behaviourist approach

Strengths	Weaknesses
It takes a very scientific approach to studying behaviour, using experimental methods which are objective, controlled and replicable.	It is reductionist, explaining behaviour only in terms of simple learning principles and ignoring mental processes (e.g., emotions, thinking).
It has many practical applications. For example, treatments based on this approach are effective for some mental disorders.	As it proposes that we are all born as a blank slate, it ignores genetic factors in behaviour (nature).
It provides arguments against the nature side of the nature-nurture debate.	It discounts the qualitative differences between non-human animals and humans.
It can explain many types of behaviour using just a few simple principles.	It is deterministic, viewing all behaviour as determined by environment and past experiences, and disregards free will.

Exam Hint: You can apply these strengths and weaknesses when evaluating various types of behaviour, such as behaviourist explanations of mental illness, attachment or aggression.

What are the applications of this approach?

- It has advanced understanding of many aspects of behaviour, such as how we learn language or develop mental disorders.
- Operant conditioning is often used to train animals.
- It has many practical applications, such as in treatments for mental disorders (see textboxes 3 and 4).

3. Aversion therapy is based on classical conditioning. Whenever a person does a particular undesirable behaviour they are repeatedly presented with an aversive (unpleasant) stimulus at the same time. The person learns that something horrible happens at the same time as the behaviour. It is a quick method and takes less effort from the patient than in other treatments (e.g., psychotherapy) but it only targets symptoms, not causes.

4. Systematic desensitisation is based on classical conditioning. It replaces **maladaptive** behaviours with **adaptive** behaviours. For example, when treating a phobia, the fear response to a stimulus is replaced with a new response, such as relaxation. The person is introduced to the fear-provoking stimulus very gradually, in a hierarchy of stages, while using the new response. It is an ethical treatment as the patient has control over moving through the stages but it provides little insight into the causes of the problem.

Key research studies

Table 2 shows a selection of behaviourist research studies.

Exam Hint: You may be required to know some of these studies in detail.

Table 2: Some behaviourist research studies

Research study	Description
Bandura, Ross and Ross (1961) ('Bobo doll' study)	They investigated whether young children learn aggression through observing and imitating the behaviour of adults. They found that children exposed to aggressive adult models were significantly more aggressive than children not exposed to aggressive models.
Watson and Rayner (1920) ('Little Albert' study)	They investigated whether a child could learn to fear something through classical conditioning. They presented a baby boy, Albert B, (11 months-old), with a white rat while simultaneously hitting a steel bar behind his head (to create fear). This was done seven times overall, in two sessions held one week apart. Then, when shown the rat on its own, little Albert began to cry; he had acquired a phobia of the rat.
Skinner (1948) (Superstition in pigeons)	He investigated whether animals could acquire superstitious behaviours. Eight pigeons were placed in Skinner boxes and given a food pellet at set intervals, regardless of their behaviour. After several days two observers recorded the pigeons' behaviour as the time interval was increased. They noted that six pigeons performed many repetitive behaviours (e.g., hopping, head tossing) before the food was given even though the delivery of food did not depend on their behaviour.
Pickens and Thompson (1968) (Rats and cocaine study)	They investigated the effects of cocaine as a positive reinforcement for rats. They fitted three laboratory-reared rats with intravenous devices so that they could self-administer a dose of cocaine when a lever was pressed. They found that cocaine reinforces behaviour. The rats learnt to press the levers to get the cocaine. When the fixed-interval between lever pressing and receiving cocaine increased the rats pressed the levers quicker so that the total reinforcement per hour stayed the same. However, as the dosage increased, the response behaviour decreases as the effects last longer.

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- (b) Freewill versus determinism debate

Qualitative: The quality of something (rather than the quantity of something).