

# The behaviourist approach: the basics

## What assumptions do behaviourists make?

Behaviourists regard all behaviour as a **response** to a **stimulus**. They assume that what we do is determined by the **environment** we are in, which provides stimuli to which we respond, and the environments we have been in in the past, which caused us to learn to respond to stimuli in particular ways. Behaviourists are unique amongst psychologists in believing that it is unnecessary to speculate about **internal mental processes** when explaining behaviour: it is enough to know which stimuli elicit which responses. Behaviourists also believe that people are born with only a handful of innate reflexes (stimulus-response units that do not need to be learned) and that all of a person's complex behaviours are the result of **learning** through interaction with the environment. They also assume that the processes of learning are common to all species and so humans learn in the same way as other animals.

## How do behaviourists explain human behaviour?

Behaviourists explain behaviour in terms of (1) the stimuli that elicit it and (2) the events that caused the person to learn to respond to the stimulus that way. Behaviourists use two processes to explain how people learn: classical conditioning and operant conditioning. In **classical conditioning**, people learn to **associate** two stimuli when they occur together, such that the response originally elicited by one stimulus is transferred to another. The person learns to produce an existing response to a new stimulus. For example, Watson & Rayner (1920) conditioned a young boy ('**Little Albert**') to respond with anxiety to the stimulus of a white rat. They achieved this by pairing the rat with a loud noise that already made Albert anxious. The anxiety response was transferred to the rat because it was presented together with the noise. The response also **generalized** to other stimuli that resembled the rat, including a rabbit and a fur coat. Over time, conditioned responses like this gradually diminish in a process called **extinction**.

In **operant conditioning**, people learn to perform new behaviours through the **consequences** of the things they do. If a behaviour they produce is followed by a **reinforcement** then the likelihood of that behaviour being repeated increases in future (the behaviour is **strengthened**). A consequence can be reinforcing in two ways: either the person gets something good (**positive reinforcement**) or they avoid something bad (**negative reinforcement**). Conversely, if a behaviour is followed by a **punishment** then the likelihood of that behaviour being repeated in future decreases (the behaviour is **weakened**). Whereas classical conditioning only allows the person to produce existing responses to new stimuli, operant conditioning allows them to learn new responses.

## How do behaviourists study human behaviour?

Much behaviourist research involves studying learning in animals under laboratory conditions, using experimental methods. **Animals** are used because behaviourists assume they learn in the same way as people but are more convenient to study. **Laboratory** settings are favoured because they allow researchers to **control** very precisely the conditions under which learning occurs (e.g. the nature and availability of reinforcement and punishment). **Experimental** methods are used because they allow inferences to be drawn about **cause and effect** relationships between the variables studied. Behaviourists also study human learning in the laboratory (as in the study of Little Albert) but more often behaviourist research using humans is centred on attempts deliberately to change behaviour in a real-world setting (e.g. the behaviour of children in a school or psychiatric patients in a hospital). As with the laboratory research, an attempt is made to control the conditions that influence learning, some of which are deliberately manipulated in order to assess their effect on a particular set of target behaviours.

An example of this type of research is **Allyon and Azrin's (1968)** study of the effect of a **token economy** on psychiatric patients. They were attempting to overcome the passivity and other behavioural problems often displayed by patients in psychiatric hospitals. They drew up a list of behaviours they wanted to promote (e.g. making beds, eating meals) and arranged for patients to be given a token every time they carried out a target behaviour. The token could be exchanged for positive reinforcers such as cigarettes or chocolate. Allyon and Azrin found that positive reinforcement led to a significant increase in the number of target behaviours the patients produced.

## Evaluation of the behaviourist approach

The main strengths of the behaviourist approach come from the methods it uses. The insistence on objectivity, control over variables and precise measurement means that the studies carried out by behaviourists tend to be very **reliable**, and the behaviourists can be credited with introducing the **scientific method** into psychology. The drawback of these methods, however, is that behaviour may be studied under very **artificial** conditions than do not reflect real-world contexts very well (although this criticism clearly does not apply to all behaviourist studies). The widespread use of animals is a source of criticism. Whilst conditioning can be observed in most species, there are **genetic influences** on what different species can and cannot learn which reflect their different evolutionary histories (e.g. rats can be conditioned to respond to tastes but not smells). This means that generalizations between species must be made with more caution than many behaviourists apply.

A more fundamental criticism of behaviourism is that it ignores the influences of **mental processes** on learning. In behaviourist theory people can only learn as a result of their own experiences. However, experience and many studies (e.g. by social learning theorists like Bandura) show that people are quite capable of **observing** and learning from the behaviour and experiences of others. Furthermore, studies of a wide range of human behaviours (principally language learning and use) have shown that classical and operant conditioning cannot adequately explain how people are able to **solve problems** without the lengthy period of trial and error that behaviourism would say is necessary. These findings imply that mental processes must play a part in explaining much human behaviour.

Nonetheless, behaviourism has supplied **practical solutions** to many human problems. Operant conditioning has proven an effective way of modifying behaviour amongst people who may be difficult to teach in other ways (e.g. autistic children) and many people with problems like phobia have benefitted significantly from **behaviour therapies** including systematic desensitization.

## The behaviourist approach and key debates

The behaviorist approach is **deterministic**: people's behaviour is assumed to be entirely controlled by their environment and their prior learning, so they do not play any part in choosing their own actions. The approach takes the **nurture** side of the nature-nurture debate, believing that apart from a few innate reflexes and the capacity for learning, all complex behaviour is learned from the environment. Their insistence that all learning can be accounted for in terms of law-governed processes like classical and operant conditioning, reflects a **nomological** approach to studying human behaviour (although behaviourists never ignore individual differences, since every person's history of learning is unique). The behaviourists' view that all behaviour, no matter how complex, can be broken down into the fundamental processes of conditioning makes it a highly **reductionist** approach to psychology.