

Describe and evaluate one of the major approaches to psychology in terms of its contributions to understanding human behaviour.

Behaviourism is known to be the second major approach of psychology. This approach will be used for the purpose of this essay to assess the contributions made to help understand human behaviour. In terms of human behaviour we will focus in particular on consumer behaviour. First of all it will be useful to examine the early beginnings of this theory. In the second part of this paper the behaviourist approach in its pure sense will be introduced before moving onto the evaluation of the approach in terms of its correlation between the theory and how it has been applied in reality. The next important part of this composition shows the valid contribution made to help consumer psychologists understand consumer behaviour. Finally the paper will conclude with a view of the arguments for and against this subject and an overall summary of the contents.

We will begin by going back to the 17th Century when two British empirical philosophers Hobbs and Locke were approaching psychology from a different perspective than what had gone before. Locke believed that the mind was a blank slate at birth, as he termed "*Tabula Rasa*", this validated the nurture belief that the only true source of knowledge about the world is sensory experience, in order to study this there was a need for research to be carried out through observation, surveys, and experiments. (Empirical methods = scientific methods). Most modern psychology has developed along the lines of Locke's view. (www.plato.stanford.edu)

However it wasn't until 1910-1911 that two psychologists J B Watson and B F Skinner brought forward the perspective of behaviourism. This approach, which became known to be the second major approach of psychology, looks at overt behaviour, in other words the behaviour that can be observed. In Watson's Behaviourist manifesto in 1913, he stated that *"psychology must discard all reference to consciousness; any term denoting mental processes was to be banned on the grounds of being unscientific because inaccessible to the observer"*. Watson believed that psychology could only make claims to being a science if it adopted the objective methods used in the natural sciences. (Gross 1999: 3) The approach of behaviourism remained the dominant force within psychology until the 1950's.

Behaviourism in its pure form looks at classical (Pavlov) and operant (Skinner and Watson) conditioning. The latter developed further by Thorndike his view was that operant conditioning had an important feature which he believed to be reinforcement (Davenport 1995: 12). Thorndike's *puzzle box* experiment demonstrated that animals could be persuaded to behave in certain ways using reinforcement (Anima I Intelligence: Thorndike 1898). This led behaviourist psychologists to predict that the same would be true of the human species. (Thorndike's Laws of Effect) The assumption being that there is sufficient similarity between non-human and human to allow such generalisation. Using the goals of science, which are prediction, understanding and control, psychologists that are employed in the business arena (especially the marketing sector) have used this ideology to be able to predict, understand and control human behaviour in terms of the consumer.

One "official" definition of consumer behavior is "The study of individuals, groups, or organisations and the processes they use to select, secure, use, and dispose of products, services, experiences, or ideas to satisfy needs and the impacts that these processes have on the consumer and society." (www.larsperner.com)

The second part of this paper will concentrate on classic conditioning and operant conditioning and reinforcement. Firstly looking at the correlation between the theory and how it is applied. Below are a sequence that illustrates the parallels between a modern day car advertiser (fig 1) and the Pavlov's salivating dog experiment (fig 2) carried out in the early 20th century (Gleitman 1995:148) both use the same classical conditioning theory.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beautiful woman (US) ---> emotional arousal (UR) in males
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beautiful woman (US) + automobile (not yet CS) ---> arousal (US) [repeated many times]
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Automobile (CS) ---> arousal (CR)

Fig 1

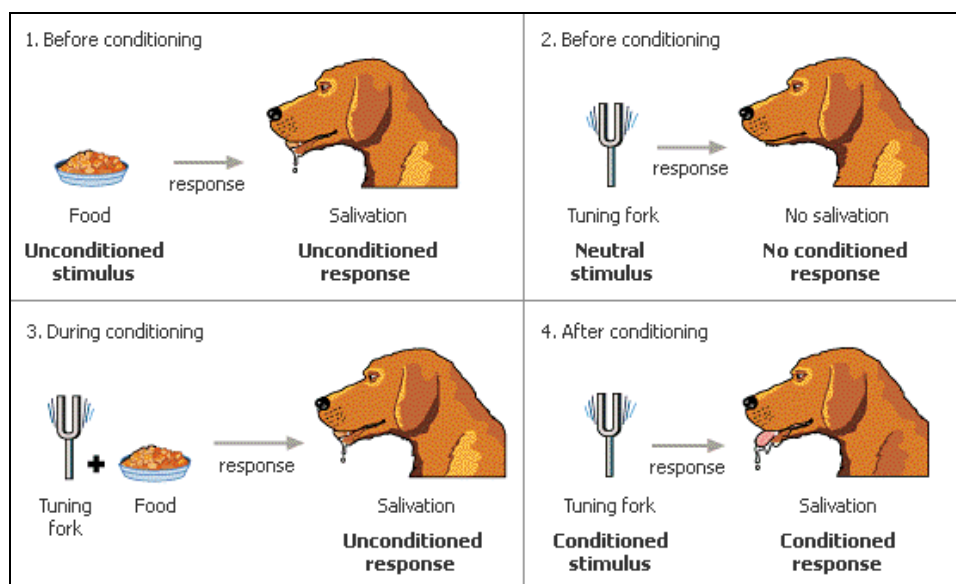


Fig 2

From this example of classical conditioning we now move onto operant conditioning. Operant or instrumental conditioning involves a different series of events, and this what we usually think of as learning. The general pattern is:

- Behaviour ---> consequences ---> behaviour is more or less likely to be repeated

There are three major forms of operant learning (positive reinforcement, punishment and negative reinforcement) and the correlation is shown below (again between the pure theory and the applied reality) in the following instances (Glassman 2000:118).

In *positive reinforcement*, an individual does something and is rewarded. He or she is then more likely to repeat the behaviour. For example, you eat a candy bar (behaviour), it tastes good (consequence), and you are thus more likely to eat a similar candy bar in the future (behavioural change).

Punishment is the opposite. You eat what looks like a piece of candy (behaviour), only to discover that it is a piece of soap with a foul taste (consequences), and subsequently you are less likely to eat anything that looks remotely like that thing ever again (changed behaviour).

It should be noted that *negative reinforcement* is very different from punishment. An example of negative reinforcement is an obnoxious sales person who calls you up on the phone, pressuring you into buying something you don't want to do (aversive stimulus). You eventually agree to buy it (changed behaviour), and the sales person leaves you alone (the aversive stimulus is terminated as a result of consequences of your behaviour).

Finally moving onto reinforcement. Another issue is schedules of reinforcement and *extinction*. Extinction occurs when behaviour stops having consequences and the behaviour then eventually stops occurring. For example, if a passenger learns that yelling at check-in personnel no longer gets him/her upgraded to first class, he/she will probably stop that behaviour. Sometimes, an individual is rewarded every time behaviour is performed (e.g., a consumer gets a soft drink every time coins are put into a vending machine). However, it is not necessary to reward behaviour every time for learning to occur. Even if a behaviour is only rewarded some of the time, the behaviour may be learned. Several different *schedules of reinforcement* are possible:

- *Fixed interval*: The consumer is given a free dessert on every Tuesday when he or she eats in a particular restaurant.
- *Fixed ratio*: Behavior is rewarded (or punished) on every *n*th occasion that it is performed. (E.g., every tenth time a frequent shopper card is presented, a free product is provided). This may also be in the form of a reward system (e.g. supermarket loyalty card) this reflects the principles of the Token Economy Programmes (Stahl and Leitenberg 1976) that was introduced by behaviourists to control and manage the behaviour of chronic schizophrenics.
- *Variable ratio*: Every time an action is performed, there is a certain percentage chance that a reward will be given. For example, every time the consumer enters the store, he or she is given a lottery ticket. With each ticket, there is a 20% chance of getting a free hamburger. The consumer may get a free hamburger twice in a row, or he or she may go ten times without getting a hamburger even once .

Having taken into account conditioning and reinforcement looking holistically the whole study of consumers is comparable to that used by behaviorist psychologists. A nomothetic approach is adopted. Primary and secondary research is employed and behaviour is investigated using experiments and observation. Surveys are also used to collate information to help the understanding of cause and effect. This study of consumers contributes greatly to market research companies and other commercial organisations in

their understanding of how the consumer behaves and thus enabling future marketing strategies to be developed.

In conclusion I would agree that there are some very positive contributions made by the behaviorism ideology in relation to the consumer. It is successful in many cases to be able to predict and control consumers spending habits however this is normally to the benefit of the companies involved. But nevertheless the behaviour is affected or changed using this concept.

On the other hand the consumer and humans in general have many other aspects to their individual make up that the behaviorist approach does not take into account such as how people think, feel, reason, how the consumer is influenced by his or her environment, consumers will sometimes be persuaded more by logical arguments, but at other times will be persuaded more by emotional or symbolic appeals.

I therefore disagree that using this approach alone would allow a complete picture to be formed. I feel that additional perspectives, such as the psychoanalytical approach, (which would look at people's emotions and what is happening at an unconscious level). Needs to be taken into account to have a more rounded view of the consumer and his or her behaviour.

To summarise this paper we have looked at the behaviourist approach and discussed how it has contributed to the understanding of human behaviour. In this instance in terms of consumer behaviour. We started with the foundations of this approach and we established links between the theories of early behaviorists such as Pavlov, Skinner, Watson and Thorndike and the applied conditioning used in our consumer society. It can be said that this approach has contributed a great deal to understanding consumer behaviour and in our consumer society we see many marketing strategies that reflect the philosophy of the behaviourist ideology.

References

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Gross 1999: 3

Davenport 1995: 12

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