The Behaviourist Approach

In Psychology learning is seen as a change in behaviour caused by an experience. Behaviourism is seen as a learning theory; an attempt to explain how people or animals learn by studying their behaviour. The Behaviourist Approach has two theories to help explain how we learn; Classical conditioning and operant conditioning. I will attempt to describe and evaluate this approach.

Ivan Pavlov was a Russian Physiologist. At the end of the 19th century Pavlov was conducting research into the physiology of digestion in dogs. During an experiment he discovered something very interesting about the dogs' behaviour and started studying it. He came up with the theory of classical conditioning, which lead on to more research into behaviour.

During Pavlov's experiment dogs were hooked up to a machine that collected and measured saliva. He noticed that the dogs started salivating not only when offered food, but also in response to events immediately preceding the feeding. He referred to the salivation that occurred when the dogs where presented with food as an unconditioned response **UCR**; an inborn reflex or instinct that did not require learning, caused by the presence of the food which he referred to as an unconditioned Stimulus **UCS**; as food is necessary for survival it is instinctual to crave it**.**

Through his experiments he discovered that if a particular neutral stimulus **NS**; with no inborn reflex response, such as a bell ringing, was combined with an **UCS** such as food then the dogs would learn to associate that **NS** with the **UCS**, and thus the **NS** would trigger salivation on its own. The **NS** had now become a conditioned stimulus **CS,** and the **UCS** a conditioned reflex **CR**; stimulus and reflex learned through association.

John B. Watson is often referred to as the father of behaviourism. Watson believed that Psychology had failed to become a natural science, due to the focus on consciousness which he thought of as very unscientific and subjective. He believed that theories should be supported by careful scientific study of observable behaviour through laboratory studies.

Inspired by the work of Ivan Pavlov, Watson conducted his own experiment, with the help of his assistant Rosalie Rayner, to show classical conditioning in humans. It is often referred to as the little Albert experiment.

Watson and Rayner wanted to show that the principles of classical conditioning could be applied to emotions, such as fear. Watson believed that when children reacted to loud noises, it was because of fear, and that this fear was an UCR.

Little Albert an 11 month old boy was chosen as the participant. Watson identified that a white rat did not provoke any fear response in Albert, so it was a NS. Little Albert was then exposed to the white rat, but every time he reached out to touch it Watson would make a loud noise. Albert would get frightened and start to cry. After repeating this several times, Albert started getting frightened just by seeing the rat. Just like the bell in Pavlov's experiment, the white rat had become a CS to Albert. Watson therefore concluded that even complex behaviour such as fear was a learned response.

Edward Thorndike, an American Psychologist, believed that learning could also take place through trial and error, and not just association. He referred to it as Instrumental learning. To demonstrate this he conducted an experiment, where he placed a hungry cat in a so called puzzle box. The box was closed so the cat could not get out. A fish was placed nearby to tempt the cat, after scratching and clawing trying to get out, the cat eventually accidentally tripped the latch to the box and managed to get out. After a couple of repeat experiments with the same result, the cat learned what to do and would release the catch immediately. This led to Thorndike's law of effect which states that positive effects such as rewards lead to "stamping in" of behaviour, and negative effects such as punishment lead to "stamping out".

This theory was further developed by Psychologist B. F. Skinner into operant conditioning.

While Pavlov's classical conditioning focused on a stimulus resulting in certain behaviour, like Thorndike, Skinner concentrated on the **effect** of behaviour. The main idea behind his theory was that the subject behaves in a certain way first, i.e. operates on the environment, hence it is called operant conditioning, this would then be followed by a consequence. There are four possible consequences; which can be divided into reinforcement and punishment. Skinner referred to anything that would encourage behaviour as a reinforcer whereas punishment discouraged behaviour. Positive reinforcement is anything pleasurable such as receiving food, or compliments; this increases the likelihood of the behaviour being repeated. Negative reinforcement is about removing something un-pleasurable; which in a way is pleasurable and again this encourages the behaviour to be repeated.

Positive Punishment is about punishing behaviour with a unpleasant stimulus; such as electric shock, and thus the subject is unlikely to repeat the behaviour. Negative punishment removes a pleasant or valued stimulus.

Skinner conducted an experiment quite similar to Thorndike's. He placed a rat in a cage, with a lever on one side that controlled food supply. If the lever was pressed; a pellet of food would be delivered to the cage. Like the cat, the rat at first triggered this lever by accident but after this happening several times; the rat learnt that pressing the lever equalled getting food.

In his experiment the rat had learnt to associate its initial behaviour, with the consequence, in this case getting food, and since food was a pleasant consequence it encouraged a repeat of the behaviour.

Many people have criticised the behaviourist approach due to its limitations. The behaviourist approach does not take into account cognition, thought or motivation, but instead assumes that humans are like animals. Humans can think about their choices and be influenced by both physical things like hormones, instincts and genetics. But the Behaviourists see us as being born a blank slate and that all behaviour is learned.

The experiments in labs have also been criticised because they are conducted in an artificial environment and therefore don't necessarily apply to the outside world.

Although there are limitations these approaches still have their uses today.

Classical conditioning has been used to treat alcoholism by connecting unpleasant reflexes to unacceptable behaviour.

Operant conditioning especially is still widely used, even in unexpected places, Store card reward schemes for example use a form of operant conditioning. The customer buys something and receives either a voucher or points to use towards a purchase at a later date; this is a positive reinforcement to encourage the customer to repeat his behaviour i.e. return to the store. Another example is in dealing with children with behavioural issues, where positive reinforcement and negative punishment is often used to teach better behaviour.

Although the Behaviourist approach has some limitations, as mentioned above, it still has its uses in treating disorders and explaining certain behaviours in people. Although it doesn't take into account the complexity of human thought processes, it can be applied to people in certain situations. As the little Albert experiment showed people can learn to associate a stimulus to a response, which explain why certain people have phobias, and possibly also help cure them of it. This Approach would probably be better if used in conjunction with other approaches where valuable information could be gained from each and combined to form a bigger picture.