

The Behaviourist Perspective.

The basic proposal of the behaviourist perspective is that the positive and negative reinforcers, which we receive in our everyday lives, condition all human behaviour. According to behaviourists we are all born as 'blank slates' and everything we do has to be learned or 'conditioned'. Behaviour can be conditioned in two ways, 1, Classical Conditioning and 2, Operant Conditioning.

One example of a behaviour, which can be learned by conditioning, is phobias. The behavioural model proposes that all phobias are developed through classical conditioning. This is where the association to a particular stimulus learns a particular response. Ivan Pavlov (1903, cited in Gross & Mcilveen 1996) was the first to outline the principles of classical conditioning when he and a team of researchers discovered it whilst investigating the salivation reflex. Pavlov was collecting saliva from dogs that were in harnesses as he presented them with food and noticed that the dogs were eventually salivating on sight of the bowl. He also started ringing a bell when the food was presented and the dogs would salivate. After a number of repetitions the bell was then rung without presenting the food and the dogs would still salivate. Some psychologists embraced this theory, John Watson being one of them. This led to one of psychology's most famous studies, Watson & Rayner's study of 'Little Albert' (1920, cited in Hill 2001). Watson & Rayner used the principles of Pavlov to condition a young child, named Albert, to develop a fear response or phobia. Little Albert was first presented with a white rat. To which, he showed no fear. Watson then struck a steel bar with a hammer three times behind Albert's head. The first strike caused Albert to jump sharply and catch his breath. The second strike caused his lips to tremble and on the third strike Albert burst into tears. Having established

Albert's fear of the loud noise, Watson & Rayner then had to associate the noise with the rat by presenting the rat at the same time as striking the steel bar. This produced a fear reaction causing Albert to cry. To test the child's response to the rat without the noise, the rat was again presented alone. On sight of the rat Albert began to cry. There is no doubt that this experiment indicated a strong possibility of a phobia being developed through classical conditioning.

The behaviourist perspective provides a convincing account of the development of phobias. This perspective is quite positive in the way that it implies that problem behaviour, such as phobias can be changed or overcome. However, it can also be criticised. Firstly, this perspective seems very cold and emotionless as it ignores the emotions that affect the way we behave and that proposes humans merely respond to their environment. Secondly, not every behaviour can be conditioned. An example of this would be a repeat offender of any crime. The punishment they have received in the past clearly has not stopped them committing the offence again. Finally, the perspective suggests that we have no choice in what we do and that we are conditioned in everything we do. This makes man a machine.