History of Behaviorism

by Sophia Tutorial

WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll discuss another important theory in psychology, the theory of behaviorism, as well as the individuals who were important to its evolution.

1. Theory of Behaviorism
2. Important Individuals in Behaviorism
   a. Ivan Pavlov
   b. John Watson
   c. B. F. Skinner
3. Radical Behaviorism

1. Theory of Behaviorism

As you learned in a previous lesson, psychology is the scientific study of the mind and behavior.**Behaviorism** focuses specifically on behavior, or the scientific aspects of psychology, in order to find out what specifically is measurable and observable.

Thus, behaviorism is the theory that studies the overt, observable behaviors of people in order to understand their mental processes.

Behaviorism also focuses on the environment and its effects on the individual to determine if the environment influences behavior or causes people to act or react in certain ways.

In a lot of ways, behaviorism itself is a reaction to some of the other theories that you'll study in this course. According to behaviorists, many of the other theories are too philosophical and not scientific enough.

While other theories can be more introspective in that they involve what the psychologists themselves think is occurring, behaviorism involves very specifically observing and measuring what is occurring in individuals.

TERM TO KNOW

Behaviorism
A theory in psychology that studies observable actions or behaviors, not internal mental states

2. Important Individuals in Behaviorism

There are three individual scientists and psychologists that are extremely important to the history of behaviorism because of their theories and research:

- Ivan Pavlov
- John Watson
- B. F. Skinner

2a. Ivan Pavlov

Ivan Pavlov was a Russian scientist, who in 1870 changed studies to physiology and the natural sciences. You may recognize his name because of his famous experiments with dogs, which involved ringing bells and subsequently bringing food out to the dogs in order to see whether the dogs would begin salivating in response to the bell. These experiments will be covered in more detail later on in the course.

The important thing to remember about Ivan Pavlov in relation to behaviorism is that he studied the different reflexes and stimuli responses that different animals and, in turn, people had in regards to the environment around them.

👤 **PEOPLE TO KNOW**

Ivan Pavlov
Developed the concept of Classical Conditioning

2b. John Watson

John Watson actually coined the term "behaviorism" in his 1913 paper, "Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It."
Watson was able to take the work of Pavlov, who was a physiologist and natural scientist, and adapt it to psychology to try to explain why people behaved in the ways they did.

He adapted the ideas of stimulus response, or a person's response to something that's going on in his or her environment, to human learning in order to explain that there are certain conditioned responses.

These are responses that people learn due to experience over time with different stimuli in their environments. People are able to learn those behaviors, and to eventually adapt and grow them into more complex behaviors.

Studying these responses helps toward understanding the entire range of human behaviors, and adapting that understanding to more difficult things.

John Watson's "Little Albert" experiments were some of his more famous experiments, and they involved conditioning a certain phobia in a child by showing him different white fluffy animals and then banging loud objects together behind him. The child grew afraid of those white objects because of the noise that he anticipated as a result of seeing them.

John Watson
Founder of Behaviorism, 1878-1958

2c. B. F. Skinner

B. F. Skinner was a psychologist from the 1950s through the 1970s, who was able to take the work of his predecessors, Pavlov and Watson, one step further to explain human behavior.
You may recognize his name in regards to the "Skinner box," which was a tool that he used in his animal experiments. He placed an animal inside of the box and gave it some reward or punishment to shape the way it behaved. These experiments led to his major contribution to behaviorism, which was the idea of operant conditioning.

Operant conditioning states that rewards and punishments in response to positive and negative behavior are forces that can be used to influence the way that people behave, and to make the chance of a particular behavior occurring either more likely or less likely.

B. F. Skinner
Founder of Operant Conditioning

3. Radical Behaviorism

Skinner is what we would call a radical behaviorist. As opposed to **cognitive behaviorism**, which combines behavioral learning theories and cognitive theories, **radical behaviorism** states that mental events or processes are completely unnecessary in describing why people behave the way they do.

Radical behaviorists essentially try to think of behavior as a "black box," meaning that whatever is going on inside the mind is irrelevant to psychology.

According to radical behaviorism, there are simply stimuli coming in and influencing the way that people behave, and then there are responses, or behaviors, as a result of those stimuli.

The theory does not consider the activity inside a person's head during this process as something that should be studied.

There are other varying degrees of behaviorism, and you'll be learning about a few of those later on in the course. Additionally, we'll discuss more in-depth what each of these contributions means to psychology as a whole.

TERMS TO KNOW

Cognitive Behaviorism
A theory that combines both behavioral learning theories and cognitive theories

Radical Behaviorism

A school of behaviorism that believes that internal mental states are unnecessary to explain behavior. Behavior is determined entirely by outside stimuli and learned responses.

☑ SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about the **theory of behaviorism**, which studies observable, measurable behavior, often in relation to the environment in which it occurs. Some of the most **important individuals in the history of behaviorism** are Ivan Pavlov, John Watson, and B. F. Skinner.

You now understand that Skinner was a radical behaviorist, and that **radical behaviorism** considers mental events and processes to be irrelevant to the study of behavior. However, this is just one of the many degrees of behaviorism, and you will learn about some of the others in later lessons.

Good luck!

Source: Adapted from Sophia tutorial by Erick Taggart.

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