

THE BEHAVIOURAL APPROACH TO PSYCHOPATHOLOGY

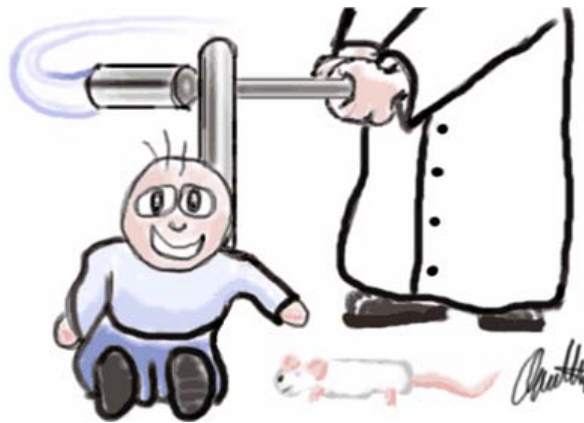
Introduction

The behavioural approach to psychopathology is sometimes called the **learning approach**. This is because it derives from the work of **Pavlov**, who was the first to explain how some forms of learning take place. Pavlov discovered that dogs were capable of learning through *repeated association* of things, and he called this form of learning *classical conditioning*.

The behavioural approach to the causes of abnormality

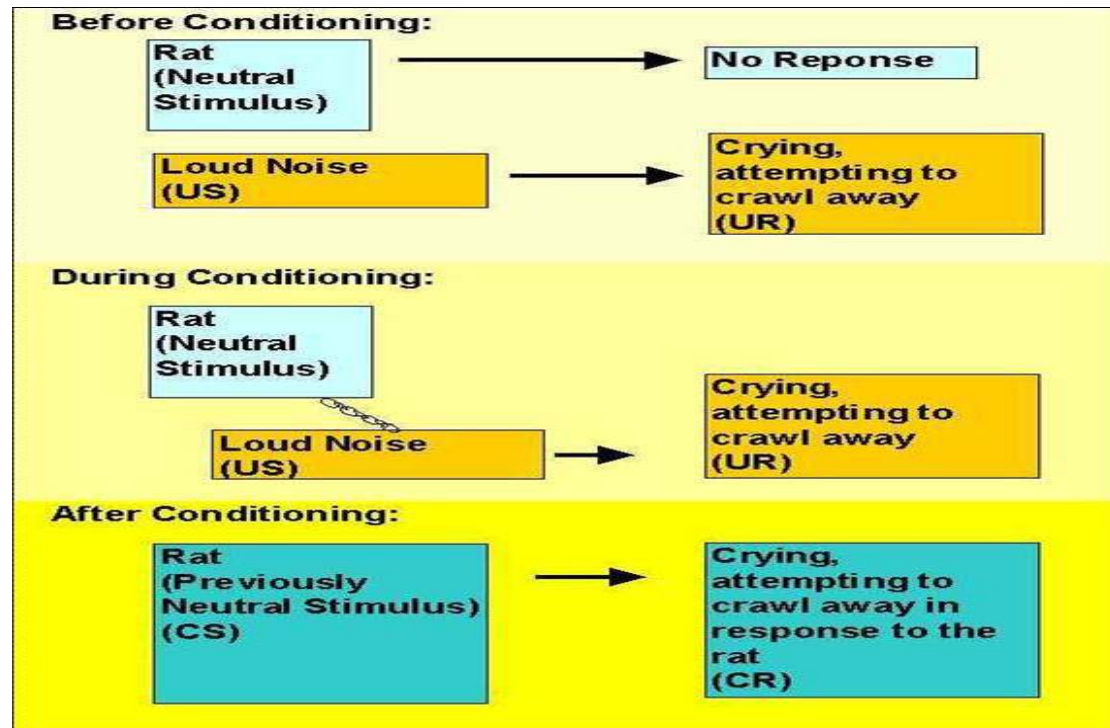
We acquire at least some of our 'normal' behaviours through the learning process that Pavlov called classical conditioning. The behavioural approach proposes that 'abnormal' behaviours can be learnt in the same way. In other words, abnormalities are caused by **faulty learning**.

In an experiment that would not be conducted today, **Watson & Rayner (1920)** showed that it was possible to condition an infant ('Little Albert') to produce a *fear response* to a stimulus which he did not previously show a fear response to.

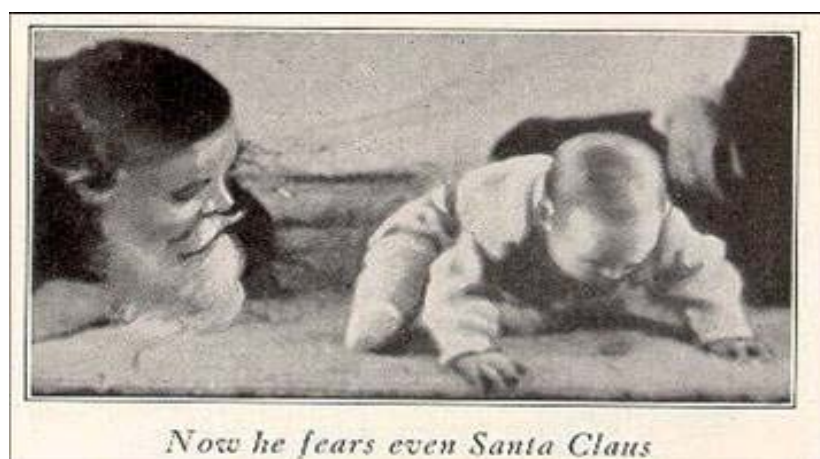


Initially, Watson and Rayner showed Albert various stimuli including a dog, a white rat, and a rolled up newspaper that had been set on fire. Because Albert produced no particular response to these stimuli, they could all be considered *neutral*. However, one stimulus that did produce a response in Albert was a loud noise caused by striking an iron bar with a hammer. This *unconditioned stimulus* produced the *unconditioned response* of fear in Albert.

What Watson and Rayner then did was to place the rat near to Albert whilst at the same time striking the iron bar with a hammer. Initially, Albert produced a fear response to the loud noise, but after having it paired with the white rat on just five occasions, he produced a fear response whenever he saw the white rat. In other words, Albert was producing a *phobic response* to the white rat.



Interestingly, Watson and Rayner found that Little Albert would also show a fear response when he was shown things that were *similar* to the white rat. These included a white mouse, a ball of cotton wool, and even a Santa Claus beard. This phenomenon is called **generalisation**. We often see it in people who were bitten by a particular kind of dog, but generalise their fear response to *all* kinds of dog.



Evaluating the behavioural approach to the causes of abnormality

Watson and Rayner saw Little Albert's 'faulty learning' as being very strong evidence that abnormalities are *not* caused by biological factors. Instead, they believed that a traumatic experience (such as being bitten by a dog), especially in early life, leads to the *conditioning* of fear to that particular stimulus.

The major strength of the behavioural approach is that *some* mental disorders (especially *phobias*) do seem to be a result of 'faulty learning'. Biological psychologists accept that it is difficult to explain phobias in terms of brain damage, the faulty regulation of brain biochemistry, and genetic factors. Therefore, the behavioural approach is *better* than the biological approach at explaining some disorders. As another example, consider **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder**. This is an anxiety disorder that occurs in response to an extreme psychological or physical experience. At least some sufferers show anxiety reactions to stimuli which were present at the time of the trauma.

However, one of the weaknesses of the behavioural approach is that although some phobics can remember the occasion on which a neutral stimulus (such as a dog) was paired with a painful stimulus (being bitten), other phobics can't remember such an occasion. This may be because they have forgotten the occasion, but critics say it might also be because phobias have other causes. In other words, the behavioural approach does not explain how *all* phobias are acquired.

Another weakness is that the behavioural approach doesn't explain the causes of *all* mental disorders. A good example here is schizophrenia, which is difficult to explain in terms of conditioning, and is much better explained in terms of biological factors. Critics also say that the behavioural approach is too *simplistic*, in that it explains abnormalities in terms of a relatively simple learning process which ignores the role played by cognitive (i.e. thinking) and emotional factors.