

John B. Watson

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John B. Watson (1878 – 1958) was an influential American psychologist credited with advancing behaviorism, a psychological approach that considers all behavior to be a result of interactions with the external environment. Watson was born in South Carolina on January 9, 1878, where he lived throughout his childhood. Despite his rebellious adolescent years and poor academic performance, he graduated with a master's degree from Furman University in South Carolina at the age of 21. He earned a Ph.D. in psychology in 1903 from the University of Chicago, where he studied animal behaviors for his doctoral dissertation. In 1908, Watson accepted a professorship at Johns Hopkins University and commenced a career dedicated to behavioral research.

Behaviorism emerged as the experimental science of observable behavior. Watson developed his theories in reaction to the simultaneous recognition of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic tradition. Contrary to Freud, Watson claimed that consciousness was an outdated religious philosophy with no scientific basis and therefore could not be validly defined or studied. In 1913, Watson published "Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It," introducing his assumptions of behaviorism as an objective science that relies on experimental research and observable data. Drawing on the work of Ivan Pavlov and his salivating dogs, Watson argued

that behavior is the result of stimulus-response associations. In his research, he used behavioral observations to make predictions and to identify and measure the causality of behaviors (Watson, 1919). Watson's ideas quickly gained respect among his peers such that he served as editor of the influential journal, *Psychological Review*, from 1910 to 1915, and became president of the American Psychological Association in 1915.

Watson and Rosalie Rayner, his long-time graduate student at Johns Hopkins University, conducted their most well-known work – the Little Albert study – to explore conditioned responses. The Little Albert study observed the behavior and emotional development of an eleven-month-old infant by demonstrating learned fear responses. They presented the child with a series of animals (i.e., a white rat, rabbit, dog, monkey) and objects (i.e., masks, cotton wool, burning newspapers), and initially he showed no fear. Over several weeks, Watson and Rayner conditioned the infant, by striking a metal bar with a hammer, to fear a white rat, which generalized conditioned fear to other white and furry objects. Their study highlighted how, through classical conditioning approaches, emotions can become conditioned responses in humans. Given advancements in ethical thinking, Watson and Rayner have been criticized for the welfare of the child in the Little Albert study (e.g., Beck, Levinson & Irons, 2009).

Later in his career, Watson published *Psychology from the Standpoint of a Behaviorist* (1919) which elaborated on his theories of objective observation and laid the groundwork for future behaviorists, such as B.F. Skinner and his views on operant conditioning. In the 1960s, the popularity of cognitive theories increased as the limits of strict behaviorism were recognized. Nonetheless, present views acknowledge the importance of both behavioral and cognitive processes. Additionally, behaviorism continues to have significant clinical applications including behavioral therapy, behavior modification, and Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) therapy. Such

behavioral approaches are successfully used in parenting, schools, prisons, and workplaces, as well as beneficial in treating addiction and neurodevelopmental disorders.

John B. Watson explored and tested his theories until he was fired from Johns Hopkins University in 1920 for having a romantic affair with Rayner. Subsequently, he divorced his wife, Mary Ickes Watson, and married Rayner. After leaving academia, Watson continued to apply his ideas of behaviorism in advertising and marketing strategies. He had a successful career for nearly two decades as an advertising executive with a major agency; Watson's prominent clients included Maxwell House Coffee and Ponds Cold Cream. In 1957, he was awarded a gold medal from the American Psychological Association for his impact in psychology. Watson died on his farm in Connecticut in 1958, whereas his legacy as a behaviorist endures.

Further Readings

Beck, H. P., Levinson, S., & Irons, G. (2009). Finding little Albert: A journey to John B. Watson's infant laboratory. *American Psychologist*, *64*(7), 605-614.
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