

# The Learning Perspective

## Introduction

Learning can be regarded as a hypothetical construct—a process that cannot be directly observed, but that can be inferred from observable behaviour. The study of how human beings learn has been dominated by behaviourism. Behaviourism developed simultaneously in Russia and in the United States, becoming a major force in psychology in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Traditional behaviourists believed that all organisms learn in the same way, and that all learning could be explained by the processes of classical and operant conditioning.

Psychologists working within this perspective have investigated the ways in which behaviour changes, usually using laboratory experiments and often using non-human animals. The behaviourists, with their emphasis on environmental factors, focused on the situational aspects of behaviour. Behaviourists claim that behaviour is determined by environmental contingencies, and suggest that personality is the result of conditioning history.

Many psychologists have portrayed behaviourist research as being reductionist and lacking in ecological validity. Alternative theories have been developed that challenge traditional learning theory. These alternative theories have put forward the idea that learning is more than a series of stimulus-response associations. Consequently, many psychologists have moved away from purely mechanistic assumptions about the origins of learning, and now include cognitive, biological and environmental factors in the highly complex set of behaviours that is involved in “learning”.

Learning theories are influential in many areas of research and occupy an important role in psychology.

## Learning outcomes

Students should expect questions asking them to:

1. describe and evaluate the four content topics as they relate to the learning perspective
2. describe and evaluate theories and empirical studies within this perspective
3. explain, where appropriate, how cultural, ethical, gender and methodological considerations may affect the interpretation of behaviour from a learning perspective
4. compare theories, empirical studies and the four content topics of this perspective with those from other perspectives
5. identify and explain the strengths and limitations of learning perspective explanations of behaviour
6. explain the extent to which the concepts of free will and determinism relate to this perspective
7. assess the extent to which learning can be explained by alternatives to traditional behaviourist approaches
8. assess the extent to which cognitive and biological factors have been added to traditional explanations of behaviour within the learning perspective.

<b><u>Content</u></b>	<b><u>Suggestions for detailed study</u></b>
<p><b>Development and cultural contexts</b></p> <p>Historical and cultural conditions that gave rise to the learning perspective</p> <p>Contribution of the learning perspective to the scientific study of behaviour</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• reaction to subjective study of the mind</li> <li>• emphasis on scientific study of observable behaviour</li> <li>• experimental testing of hypotheses</li> </ul>
<p><b>Framework</b></p> <p>Key concepts</p> <p>Assumptions on which key concepts are based</p> <p>Evaluation of assumptions</p> <p>Theoretical explanations of behaviour</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• classical conditioning, operant conditioning</li> <li>• observational learning</li> <li>• cognitive maps</li> <li>• biological preparedness</li> <li>• critical periods in learning</li> <li>• only observable, objective behaviour should be studied</li> <li>• learning can take place in the absence of reinforcement</li> <li>• innate predisposition to learning</li> <li>• comparison with other perspectives to explain strengths and limitations</li> <li>• empirical studies that challenge or support</li> <li>• classical and operant conditioning</li> <li>• shaping</li> <li>• social learning, modelling</li> <li>• learned helplessness</li> </ul>
<p><b>Methodologies</b></p> <p>Methods</p> <p>Strengths and limitations of methods</p> <p>Ethics and controversies of research</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• experiments</li> <li>• observations</li> <li>• case studies</li> <li>• replicability</li> <li>• ecological validity</li> <li>• use of human participants for research</li> <li>• use of non-human animals for research</li> </ul>
<p><b>Application</b></p> <p>Effectiveness (relative strengths and limitations) of the perspective in explaining psychological or social questions</p> <p>Application of theories and findings of empirical studies from the learning perspective</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• comparison with other perspectives on questions such as aggression, gender differences or stress</li> <li>• contribution of learning theories to areas such as education (for example, programmed learning), work (for example, modelling of behaviours) or therapy (for example, systematic desensitization)</li> </ul>