

## Overview of the Behaviorist Approach

### Assumptions:

- **Behavior is the only valid data in psychology.** Behavior is observable and can therefore be measured objectively. 'Objectively' in this case means in an unbiased way.
- **Subjectivity should be eliminated from psychology.** Subjective data is that which comes from one's own mind and is therefore biased. Introspection is a subjective method that involves close personal reflection and reporting. Behaviorism rejects introspection as a method of data collection.
- **Learning can be understood in terms of external causes rather than internal causes.** Environmental influences are seen as the roots for learning and mental activities are considered useless as data.
- **Behavior is almost entirely determined by the environment.** Genetic basis for behavior are rejected and behavior is seen to be purely learned.
- **Simple stimulus-response associations are the building blocks of all behavior, no matter how complex.**
- **Laws of learning are the same for all species and can be seen in any environment.** Much of the behaviorism research involves experiments with animals.

### Key concepts:

- **Classical conditioning** – This is learning through association. See Pavlov (1927)
- **Operant conditioning** – This is learning through reinforcement and punishment. See Skinner (1948)

### Methods:

- **Laboratory experiments** – These are central to the behaviorist approach as only under laboratory conditions can we "control" the environment. In striving to make psychology a science Behaviorism obligates the use of scientific/empirical methods. Many such experiments also investigate non-human animal behavior.

### Evaluation:

- (+) **Behaviorism has been very influential.** Modern psychology still relies heavily on scientific methods that were first proposed by Watson's (1913) Behaviorist Manifesto.
- (+) **Practical applications.** Behaviorism has given rise to numerous therapeutic applications.
- (-) **The approach is seen as mechanistic.** Human beings are complex animals, we feel emotions, we live in complex societies etc. To see humans as functioning in a mechanistic manner is to over-simplify human behavior.
- (-) **It excludes innate factors.** We now know that genetic factors do play an enormous role in influencing human behavior and behaviorism simply does not acknowledge this.
- (-) **It is deterministic and reductionist.** The approach rejects the notion of free will, that we actively choose how to behave. Reductionist means that the approach takes complex behaviors and tries to explain them in simplistic ways (e.g. S-R).
- (-) **Based on work with non-human animals.** The approach has been criticized for making generalizations about human beings based on experiments on non-human animals.