

The Learning Perspective

Introduction

The study of how humans learn has dominated behaviourism. Behaviourism developed simultaneously in Russia and in the United States, becoming a major force in psychology in the first part of the 20th century.

Traditionalist 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.

In this unit students will examine the foundations of behaviourism, and then they will look at how the learning perspective has developed over the last fifty years, taking into consideration cognitive, biological and social factors that contribute to learning.

Objectives of the Unit:

- Describe and evaluate the cultural context and development, the conceptual framework, the methodology, and the application of the learning model.
- Describe and evaluate theories and empirical studies within this perspective.
- Explain how cultural, ethical, gender, and methodological considerations affect the interpretation of behaviour from a learning perspective.
- Compare theories, empirical studies and the conceptual framework of this model with the other perspectives.
- Identify and explain the strengths and limitations of learning theory explanations of behaviour.
- Explain the extent to which free will and determinism are integral in this perspective.
- Explain the extent to which learning can be explained by alternatives to traditional behaviourist approaches.
- Assess the extent to which cognitive, biological, and environmental factors contribute to explanations of behaviour within the learning perspective.

Content:

Historical Development and Cultural Context	Application
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Emphasis on scientific study	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Gender role development• Contributions to therapy• Contributions to education
Key Concepts	Methodology
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Radical Behaviourism• Classical and operant conditioning• The Law of Effect• Social Learning Theory• Learned helplessness• Imprinting• Latent learning• Instinctual shift	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Experimentation• Observation• Reliability - external and internal• Ecological validity• Triangulation• Use of animals in research• Ethical considerations

Basic Assumptions	Strengths and weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The majority of behaviour is learned from the environment after birth. • Psychology should investigate the laws and products of learning. • Behaviour is determined by the environment, since we are the total of all our past learning experiences, freewill is an illusion. • Only observable behaviours should be studied if psychology is to be objective. • There is an innate predisposition to learning. • Learning can take place in the absence of reinforcement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Behaviourism was very scientific, with high levels of reliability. • The approach is reductionist - explaining a great deal of phenomena using only a few simple principles. • It has many practical applications which have been very effective. • Heavy reliance on animal research - discounts the qualitative difference between humans and non-human animals. • Ignores important mental processes involved in learning. • Highly deterministic. • Questionable ecological validity

Theorists to know: John Watson, Edward Thorndike, B.F. Skinner, Ivan Pavlov, Albert Bandura, Martin Seligman, Edward Tolman, Wolfgang Kohler