

A-Level Psychology

Learning Theories · Key Studies

Edexcel Psychology (9PS0)

Key Studies

7 entries

The named classic and contemporary studies for Learning Theories - conditioning and social learning.

Classic study

Watson and Rayner (1920) - Little Albert

Aim: to show that an emotional response, namely fear, can be conditioned in a human infant through classical conditioning. **Method:** a single case study of an 11-month-old boy, 'Albert'; a white rat (neutral stimulus) was repeatedly paired with a loud bar-strike (unconditioned stimulus) that startled him. **Findings:** after several pairings Albert cried and tried to crawl away when shown the rat alone; the fear generalised to other furry objects such as a rabbit, a dog and cotton wool. **Conclusion:** phobias and emotional reactions can be acquired through classical conditioning, supporting a learning explanation of behaviour. **Evaluation:** + a controlled, carefully recorded demonstration that classical conditioning works in humans; – seriously unethical (lasting distress, no deconditioning, no clear consent), and one infant gives very low population validity.

Contemporary studies

Bandura, Ross and Ross (1961) - Bobo doll

Aim: to test whether children imitate aggression seen in an adult model and whether imitation depends on the model's sex. **Method:** a lab experiment with 72 children (36 boys, 36 girls, aged 3 – 5); they observed an adult behave either aggressively or non-aggressively toward a Bobo doll, or saw no model, then were observed at play. **Findings:** children who saw aggression reproduced more physical and verbal aggression toward the doll; boys imitated more physical aggression, and same-sex models were copied more. **Conclusion:** aggression can be learned through observation and imitation, supporting social learning theory. **Evaluation:** + tightly controlled with standardised model behaviour, so it is replicable; – a novel doll lacks ecological validity and the brief exposure tells us little about long-term effects.

Becker et al. (2002) - Television and eating attitudes in Fiji

Aim: to investigate whether the arrival of Western television in Fiji was linked to disordered eating attitudes in adolescent girls. **Method:** a natural experiment; two samples of Fijian schoolgirls completed an Eating Attitudes Test, one in 1995 (shortly after television arrived) and another in 1998, supported by interviews. **Findings:** EAT-26 scores indicating disordered eating rose from about 13 percent to about 29 percent; self-induced vomiting to control weight appeared, and girls described wanting to look like television characters. **Conclusion:** exposure to Western media models reshaped body ideals and eating behaviour through observation and imitation, supporting social learning. **Evaluation:** + real-world natural setting gives high ecological validity; – correlational, so other social changes could be involved, and self-report attitudes may not match actual behaviour.

Capafons et al. (1998) - Systematic desensitisation for fear of flying

Aim: to test whether systematic desensitisation reduces a fear of flying compared with no treatment. **Method:** a controlled trial; 41 aerophobics were split into a treatment group, given relaxation plus graded exposure built from an anxiety hierarchy across roughly 12 – 15 sessions, and an untreated control group; fear was measured by self-report and physiological recordings while watching a flight video. **Findings:** the treatment group reported and showed lower fear and arousal than controls, though a small number still felt afraid. **Conclusion:** systematic desensitisation, based on counter-conditioning, is an effective treatment for phobias, supporting classical-conditioning explanations. **Evaluation:** + objective physiological measures strengthen the self-report data; – the therapy was not effective for everyone and demands time and commitment from clients.

Key theory studies (Pavlov / Skinner / Bandura)

Pavlov (1927) - Classical conditioning in dogs

Aim: to investigate whether a reflex salivation response could be conditioned to a previously neutral stimulus. **Method:** a controlled study of dogs in a sound-proofed room; a bell (neutral stimulus) was sounded just before food (unconditioned stimulus) was given, and salivation was measured through a tube fitted to the salivary gland. **Findings:** after repeated pairings the bell alone (now a conditioned stimulus) produced salivation (a conditioned response); the response weakened on extinction and could spontaneously recover. **Conclusion:** involuntary reflexes can be learned by association, providing the basis of classical conditioning. **Evaluation:** + highly controlled and precisely measured, so it is reliable and replicable; – findings come from dogs, so generalising to complex human learning is limited.

Skinner (1938) - Operant conditioning in rats

Aim: to investigate how consequences shape the frequency of a voluntary behaviour. **Method:** rats were placed in a 'Skinner box'; pressing a lever delivered a food pellet (positive reinforcement), while in other trials lever-pressing switched off an unpleasant electric current (negative reinforcement); response rates were recorded automatically. **Findings:** reinforced lever-pressing increased and became more frequent, while behaviour that was not reinforced declined; reinforcement schedules altered how persistently the rats responded. **Conclusion:** behaviour is strengthened by reinforcement and weakened by its absence, demonstrating operant conditioning. **Evaluation:** + the apparatus gave objective, standardised and replicable measures; – it studies animals in an artificial cage, so applying it to free human choice is questionable, and the procedures raise animal-ethics concerns.

Bandura (1965) - Vicarious reinforcement

Aim: to test whether seeing a model rewarded or punished affects whether children imitate the model's aggression. **Method:** a lab experiment in which children watched a film of an adult attacking a Bobo doll; the model was then either rewarded, punished, or received no consequence, after which the children's free play was observed and they were later offered incentives to reproduce what they had seen. **Findings:** children who saw the model punished imitated least, yet when offered rewards all groups could reproduce the aggression equally well. **Conclusion:** consequences to a model (vicarious reinforcement) influence performance rather than learning, and learning can occur without direct reinforcement. **Evaluation:** + controlled conditions isolate the effect of vicarious consequences; – the artificial task and immediate testing limit how far the results extend to everyday behaviour.