

**AQA A LEVEL
PSYCHOLOGY**

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TOPIC COMPANION

Approaches in Psychology



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THE ORIGINS OF PSYCHOLOGY

Specification: Origins of psychology: Wundt, introspection and the emergence of psychology as a science.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

- Outline the origins of psychology, including the significance of Wilhelm Wundt and introspection.
- Outline the emergence of Psychology as a Science.

The Origins of Psychology

It is useful to understand the **origins of psychology**, by appreciating the emergence of different psychological approaches over time. The timeline below outlines the origins of psychology from **Wilhelm Wundt** in 1879, to the emergence of cognitive neuroscience in 2000.

1879	Wundt opened the first experimental psychology laboratory in Leipzig, Germany and, as a result, Psychology began to emerge as its own discipline. Before this, in the 17-19 th centuries, psychology only was regarded as an experimental branch within philosophy.
1900	Freud established the psychodynamic approach . He highlighted the importance of the unconscious mind on behaviour and developed his own therapy called psychoanalysis .
1913	Watson and Skinner established the behaviourist approach . They criticised Freud and Wundt, arguing that true scientific psychology should restrict itself to studying phenomena that can be directly observed and measured. They believed that <i>all</i> behaviour is learnt and that psychologists should only be interested in observable behaviours.
The 1950s	Rogers and Maslow developed the humanistic approach . They rejected the views put forward by both the behaviourist and psychodynamic approaches and emphasised the importance of free will by attempting to understand the whole person.
The 1960s	Ten years later, the cognitive approach emerged with the introduction of the computer. The cognitive approach was interested in studying mental processes; cognitive psychologists believe that we can make inferences about how the mind works based on results from laboratory experiments.
The 1980s	The biological approach began to surface as the dominant approach in psychology. This was due to advances in technology, for example, brain scans that allow psychologists to have an increased understanding of the functioning human brain.
2000	Most recently, cognitive neuroscience has emerged in the forefront of psychology, which brings together the biological and cognitive approaches. This approach investigates how biological structures influence mental states.

Wundt and Introspection

Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1920) is often considered as the father of experimental psychology and was the first person to acknowledge himself as a psychologist. In 1875, at Leipzig University, Germany, he set up the first laboratory dedicated to experimental psychology. Wundt's approach became known as **structuralism** because he used scientific methods to study human consciousness by breaking its structure down into smaller components, such as sensations and perceptions. He developed a technique, known as **introspection**.

Introspection means “looking into” and is the process in which a person examines their inner world, by consciously observing their thoughts and emotions. Wundt trained his participants so that they could give detailed observations from their introspection. He strictly controlled the environment where introspection took place, including the stimuli (e.g. images or sounds) and tasks (e.g. a description of their perception or emotions) that participants were asked to consider. The information Wundt gleaned from his participants’ introspection was used to shed light on the processes involved in human consciousness.

The Emergence of Psychology as a Science

Wundt showed that **empirical methods** could be applied to mental processes. However, Watson and Skinner criticised the subjective nature of the personal observations which made it difficult to make generalisations from the research. Watson and Skinner emphasised the importance of rigorous scientific processes and carefully controlled laboratory experiments, which many psychologists still rely on today.

Cognitive psychologists believe that internal mental thoughts are an important area of study and they attempt to make inferences based on human behaviour, where they draw conclusions about cognitive processes based on human behaviour in scientific laboratory investigations.

The biological approach makes use of sophisticated technology, including brain scanning techniques, like fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) and PET (positron emission tomography) scans, to understand the structure and function of the human brain. The cycle of scientific investigation is perpetuated by psychologists testing their concepts, making objective observations which can be replicated and then refining their theories according to the findings, before testing once again.

Exam Hint: For this section, it is useful to understand how each approach in psychology (those presented in the timeline above) have contributed to psychology becoming a science.

Issues and Debates

- Wundt’s approach to psychological experimentation, using the method of introspection, is **idiographic** in nature. However, this was heavily criticised by the behaviourists, as universal principles that could be applied to explain human behaviour cannot be generated from introspection. Behaviourists suggest that a **nomothetic approach** to psychological investigations is more advantageous because it overcomes these limitations.
- Over the years, psychology as a discipline has become more **scientific** due to the modernisation of methods used when studying the human brain. The use of experimental methods in biological psychology, such as brain imaging techniques, demonstrate the scientific and technological advances that psychologists are now utilising.

Possible Exam Questions

- Define what is meant by introspection. (2 marks)
- Briefly describe the emergence of psychology as a science. (4 marks)
- Explain Wundt’s role in the development of psychology. (6 marks)

Exam Hint: Students may wish to refer to Wundt being the father of modern psychology and the origins of his investigations in Germany; explanation of his structured methods to investigate introspection and how this paved the way for later research provide suitable elaboration.

THE BEHAVIOURIST APPROACH

Specification: Learning approaches: the behaviourist approach, including classical conditioning and Pavlov's research, operant conditioning, types of reinforcement and Skinner's research; social learning theory including imitation, identification, modelling, vicarious reinforcement, the role of mediational processes and Bandura's research.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

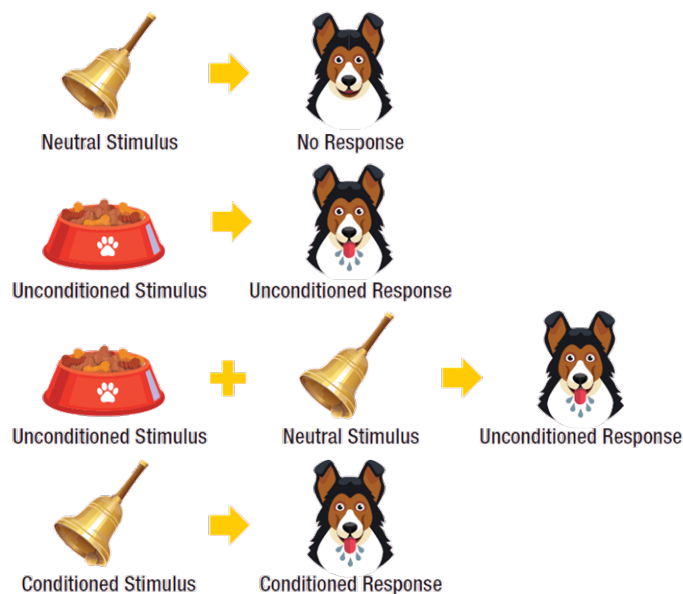
- Outline and evaluate Pavlov's classical conditioning.
- Outline and evaluate Skinner's operant conditioning.
- Outline and evaluate Bandura's social learning theory.

The Behaviourist Approach

The **behaviourist approach** is one of the most influential approaches in modern psychology. The behaviourist approach has many key assumptions, including:

1. Psychologists should only study **observable, quantifiable behaviour**.
2. All behaviour is **learned**.
3. Humans are no different from animals and should not be regarded as more complex.
4. Research on animal behaviour is directly relevant to humans.

Classical Conditioning



One of the first behaviourists to explore the relationship between learning and behaviour was Ivan **Pavlov**. Pavlov developed the theory of **classical conditioning** which is a type of learning in which an existing involuntary reflex is associated with a new stimulus. He famously tested his theory using dogs, who were conditioned to **associate** the sound of a bell (**neutral stimulus**) with food (**unconditioned stimulus**). This resulted in the dogs producing a salivation response (**conditioned response**) at the sound of a bell (**conditioned stimulus**), even when no food was present. Pavlov demonstrated that repeated exposure to an event leads to a learned and uncontrollable behaviour. This process can be used to explain the acquisition of phobias and the development of attachment.

Operant Conditioning

Developing these ideas, **Skinner** suggested that behaviour is the result of learning through the consequences of our actions. Skinner conducted research into his **operant conditioning** theory using rats. He found that three **types of reinforcement** will affect behaviour:

- 1) **positive reinforcement** – when a behaviour is followed by a desirable consequence (reward) and is more likely to be repeated;
- 2) **negative reinforcement** – when a behaviour is followed by the removal of an adverse consequence and is more likely to be repeated;
- 3) **punishment** – when a behaviour is followed by an unpleasant consequence and is less likely to be repeated.

Exam Hint: Students often confuse negative reinforcement and punishment. Remember, negative reinforcement is the removal of an unpleasant consequent which makes a behaviour MORE likely to be repeated; whereas, punishment makes a behaviour LESS likely to be repeated.

Skinner created the Skinner box to examine operant conditioning in rats and pigeons. The animal would move around the cage, and when it pressed the lever (by accident), it would be rewarded with a food pellet. The animal would learn, through positive reinforcement, that each time it pressed the lever, it would be rewarded with food. It, therefore, learnt a new voluntary behaviour which is repeated to receive the reward again.

Evaluation of The Behaviourist Approach

- Behaviourists have significantly contributed to the still-developing recognition of **psychology as a science**. The experimental methods used by Pavlov and Skinner rejected the earlier emphasis in psychology on introspection and encouraged research that focused on more objective dimensions of behaviour. According to behaviourists, this emphasis on the scientific method has led to an increasingly valid and reliable understanding of human behaviour. These methods have also helped psychology gain credibility and status as a scientific discipline, which in turn attracts more funding and research opportunities.
- The behaviourists were influential in encouraging the use of **animals as research subjects**. They believed that the learning processes in humans and animals are very similar; consequently, Pavlov conducted research using dogs, and Skinner used rats and pigeons. Using non-human animals in research gives experimenters more control over the process, without demand characteristics or individual differences influencing findings. However, many consider using animals in experiments to be unethical as there is less concern about protection from harm for non-human subjects. Furthermore, some argue that findings from animal experiments are not generalisable to human behaviour: Skinner's operant conditioning theory may provide an understanding of rat behaviour, but little about human behaviour.
- The behaviourist approach has made important contributions to our modern understanding of human mental illness. For example, many phobias are thought to be the result of earlier unpleasant learning experiences. Consequently, this understanding has helped psychologists develop therapies, such as **systematic desensitisation**, that attempt to re-condition a patient's fear response. Also, some addictions such as gambling can be better understood through operant conditioning, as the rewards of gambling could be seen to reinforce the destructive behaviour. This demonstrates that the behaviourist approach has many **real-world applications** in the understanding and treatment of atypical behaviour.
- The behaviourist approach has been criticised for its limited view regarding the origins of behaviour. Behaviourists ignore alternative levels of explanation including the role of cognition and emotional factors in influencing behaviour. Skinner countered this argument, however, stating that for behaviour to be investigated scientifically, it had to be directly measurable and observable, which cognitions are not. Further to this, he said that even the most complex of human interactions could be explained using operant conditioning principles of learning by the consequences of our actions to either repeat or cease the behaviour.

Issues and Debates

- Since the behavioural approach suggests that all behaviour is learned, it falls on the **nurture** side of the **nature-nurture debate**, in which our experiences and surroundings shape our behaviour directly rather than any internal or biological factors. The behaviourist approach refers to the human mind as a **tabula rasa** (blank slate) suggesting that at birth the mind is blank and throughout life, the slate is filled while behaviour is shaped through learning.
- The fact that behaviourists believe that behaviour is controlled by something as simple as a stimulus-response association, as in classical conditioning, is an example of **environmental determinism**. Behaviourists argue that humans have little choice in their behaviour, and our behaviour is simply the product of environmental learning.

Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory (SLT) rests on the idea of **observational learning**: that learning occurs through the **observation** and **imitation** of behaviour performed by **role models**, who **model** behaviour in a social environment. Unlike the behaviourist approach, from which it derives, SLT recognises the importance of cognitive processes - **mediational processes** - and rejects the notion that learning is purely the outcome of a stimulus-response loop.

As its name implies, learning is a social phenomenon. In order for learning to take place, someone must model an attitude or behaviour. If the person observing the behaviour sees the person as a 'role model', they will identify with them. **Identification** involves associating with the qualities, characteristics and views of role models, to become more like that person. There is evidence, from Shutts et al., 2010, to suggest that for children, the age and gender similarity to models is an important determinant of imitation. This cognitive appraisal process clearly distinguishes SLT from the more deterministic behaviourist approach.

SLT is defined by four distinct mediational, or mental, processes: **attention**, **retention**, **reproduction**, and **motivation**. If these factors are implemented, imitation (i.e. copying of what has been observed) can take place; if the observed behaviour is rewarded, imitation is more likely. This learning from the observation of others is what Bandura called **vicarious reinforcement**.

Exam Hint: SLT is different to the other behaviourist theories, as it takes into the account the role of mediational processes (thoughts). According to Bandura, for SLT to take place, a person will form a mental representation of the behaviour and weigh up the pros and cons of being rewarded, before copying the behaviour. If the pros outweigh the cons, then they will imitate the observed behaviour.

Bandura conducted a series of experiments examining SLT as he believed that observational learning, which he called modelling, is the most important process in human learning.

Bandura, Ross & Ross (1961) – The Bobo Doll Experiment

Aim: To investigate whether aggression can be learned through social learning theory principles.

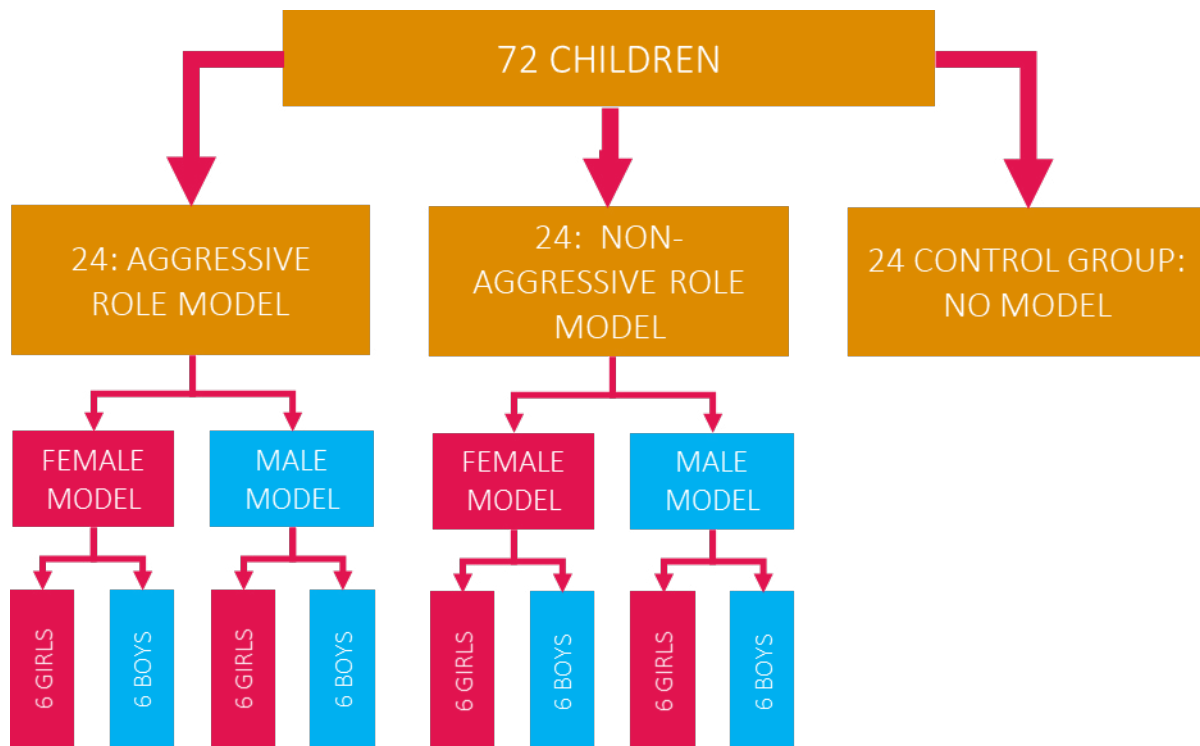
Method: 72 children (36 male and 36 female) aged between 3 and 6 years old were put into one of three groups for 10 minutes:

1) **Aggressive model** – the child played in a room while an adult hit and shouted at a "Bobo doll": a plastic inflatable toy doll which was heavy at the bottom and wobbled when hit. This group was further subdivided by the gender of the child and the adult model, creating four conditions (see below).

2) **Non-aggressive model** – the child played in a room while an adult played quietly with a construction set. This group was further sub-divided once again by the gender of the child and the adult model, creating another four conditions (see below).

3) **Control group** – the child did not see a model.

The children were deliberately frustrated by being taken into another room where they were told that they could not play with any toys. Then, they were placed alone in a room with a range of aggressive toys (mallet, gun) and non-aggressive toys (dolls, crayons) and the Bobo doll for twenty minutes whilst being observed.



Results: Children who saw the aggressive model produced more aggressive acts than those in either of the other two groups. Boys imitated same-sex models more than girls. Girls imitated more physical aggression if they saw male models, and more verbal aggression if they saw female models.

Conclusion: Aggressive behaviour can be learned, in children, through observation and imitation of a model.

Evaluation of Social Learning Theory

- One strength of SLT is its plentiful research support. For example, **Fox and Bailenson (2009)** found that humans were more likely to imitate computer-generated ‘virtual humans’ who were similar to themselves; **Rushton and Campbell (1977)** found that same-sex modelling significantly increased the number of female observers who agreed to, and then actually did, donate blood; and **Myers (2015)** confirmed the importance of vicarious learning for the effectiveness of workplace teams. These studies demonstrate support for different aspects of SLT, including modelling and vicarious reinforcement, adding **credibility** to the key principles of this theory.
- The methodology used in the research to support SLT has been criticised. Bandura made extensive use of the experimental laboratory method, which is artificial, strictly-controlled and contrived in its very nature. As a result, there is the possibility of demand characteristics occurring whereby the children

pick up on cues in the environment, guess the aim of the investigation and adjust their behaviour accordingly, lowering the internal validity of the study. Therefore, the participants may have been acting in an aggressive way towards the Bobo doll because that is what they thought was expected of them rather than it being a genuine and new learned behaviour.

- A strength of SLT is its **application to real-world issues**. It has long been a feature in explanations of criminal behaviour (Sykes and Matza, 1957) and recent research has continued that focus (Akers, 1998). It has also been used to examine and evaluate the effectiveness of advertising: **Andsager et al. (2006)** found that ‘identification with a character or example may increase the likelihood that audiences will model behaviour presented in an anti-alcohol message’. Consequently, the principles of SLT can be used to provide a positive impact on promotional health campaigns, and indirectly help combat problem behaviours like alcoholism.
- One limitation of SLT revolves around the **issue of causality**. It is not clear if people learn behaviour from models, or if they seek out models who exhibit behaviour or attitudes they already favour. **Siegel and McCormick (2006)**, for example, argue that young people who hold deviant values and attitudes are more likely to associate with similarly-inclined peers because they are more fun to be with, and thus the reinforcement of ‘deviant’ behaviour is a two-way process and not necessarily the result of SLT itself. Also, SLT struggles to explain complex behaviours like gender development. Children are exposed to a whole host of influences when growing up, and these different influences interact in a complex way. Consequently, it is difficult to distinguish behaviours that develop because of SLT from the many other factors that contribute to human behaviour, which poses an issue for the social learning explanation of behaviour.

Issues and Debates

- Social learning theorists recognise that behaviour is controlled by outside forces, such as modelling, but that cognitions, in the form of mediational processes, also have a role to play; as such SLT demonstrates a **soft determinism** stance.
- Bandura, in his research with the infamous Bobo doll, and later work with other researchers investigating the role of vicarious learning in shaping behaviour, take a **nomothetic approach** as he attempts to generate general laws of behaviour which can be widely applied.

Possible Exam Questions

1. A psychologist studying the role of reinforcement in shaping behaviour conducted out a laboratory experiment. To do this, she placed a rat in a box. When the rat pressed a level, first on an accidental basis, they received food treat. With each attempt thereafter, the time taken to press the lever to receive the reward decreased.

Identify the type of conditioning being investigated in this experiment. (1 mark)

2. Briefly explain what social learning theorists mean by *modelling*. (1 mark)

Exam Hint: Although this is only a one-mark question, the response needs to provide sufficient explanation about the concept of modelling as a process whereby a person imitates the behaviour of a role model.

3. Define what social learning theorists mean by *imitation*. (1 mark)

Exam Hint: Simply offering the word ‘copying’ is not sufficient to gain any credit here. A sound response will explain imitation as copying behaviour of a role model. A brief example to describe imitation would also be creditworthy, but not necessary.

4. Mario often loses his temper when he becomes frustrated or angry. Most of the time he can keep his feelings under control, such as when he is at work. However, one day, after some negative feedback from his Manager, Mario stormed out of the meeting, kicking a nearby plant pot on his way so hard that it shattered.

Suggest how a psychologist taking the behavioural approach could explain Mario's behaviour. (2 marks)

Exam Hint: Students can sometimes find it difficult to apply their knowledge and understanding of the behavioural approach to the novel scenario, in this case, Mario's behaviour. Responses must suggest how Mario would have learned the behaviours mentioned above.

5. Explain one way in which the social learning theory approach overlaps with one other approach you have studied in psychology. (2 marks)

Exam Hint: One mark is available here for identifying another suitable approach and the second mark is for explaining the overlap between the two. The most common response is likely to centre around the behaviourist approach with the common theme of all behaviour being learned. Alternatively, students may draw comparisons with the cognitive approach in psychology which highlights the role of cognitions (mediational processes) in learning.

6. Ms Karara is a year six teacher. When it is time to go out to break or to go home, she notices that some students in her class push to the front of the queue to line up.

Explain, with reference to social learning theory, how Ms Karara might use vicarious reinforcement to modify the behaviour of her students. (3 marks)

Exam Hint: To demonstrate sound knowledge and understanding of the concept of vicarious reinforcement, candidates must include reference to the fact that the students will need to observe a model being reinforced (rewarded by Ms Karara) for appropriate behaviour (lining up without pushing in) whilst linking it closely to the scenario.

7. Describe one procedure that behavioural psychologists have used to investigate conditioning. (3 marks)

Exam Hint: It is crucial for responses to this question to focus on the procedural elements and not the findings or conclusions drawn. Reference to a controlled environment, association forming between a stimulus and a response (Pavlov), and/or any rewards given (Skinner) which perpetuates the behaviour are suitable here.

8. Debbie is telling a story of her childhood to her friend, Harj: "When I was six, and at my sisters' birthday party, a balloon burst near my face with a really loud bang. Even to this day, balloons still terrify me and I cannot go near them!"

Using your knowledge and understanding of classical conditioning, explain why Debbie is scared by balloons. (3 marks)

Exam Hint: Students must apply their knowledge of classical conditioning accurately to the scenario with Debbie and balloons using the key terms associated with classical conditioning: NS, UCS, UCR, CS and CR.

9. Heather has just started learning to ice skate and is keen to skate well. She watches other skaters on the ice carefully. When she sees another skater make a difficult turn, she then tries to copy the same move. She considers how the other skater was positioning their body weight on their ice blades and whether she can do the same.

Mediational processes have a central role to play in social learning theory. With reference to Heather's experience, outline the role of mediational processes in social learning. (4 marks)

10. Identify and explain two strengths of the behaviourist approach in psychology. (4 marks)

Exam Hint: Students can sometimes find it difficult to express the strengths of the behavioural approach in psychology clearly. Unfortunately, points often identified as strengths are merely features of the approach and, as such, answers describe Pavlov or Skinner's work with no link why this is a strength. Sound answers are likely to focus on the use of experimental methodology and the scientific nature of the approach.

11. A psychology A-level student, Sian, went home and was telling her Dad, Dafydd, about what she had learned at college that day:

Sian said: "The behaviourist approach has been really influential in understanding human behaviour. But, so much of the research has been conducted using animals as participants." Discuss the value of the behaviourist approach in understanding human behaviour. (5 marks)

Exam Hint: To gain full credit for this question, students must sustain a discussion on the value of the behaviourist approach rather than going into great depth with the outline of the main assumptions. The most likely discussion will come from the advantages and disadvantages of research using animals and generalising findings to human behaviour, given the scenario provided about Sian's discussion with her Dad.

12. Kym got trapped in a lift for several hours when it broke down. Now, she cannot face going into a lift at all and is filled with fear at the very thought.

Joshua is given some chocolate for cleaning out the litter tray for their pet cat. Jermaine, his twin brother, saw this. The next day, the twin's mum finds Jermaine cleaning out the cat's litter tray.

Describe how the behaviour of Kym and Jermaine can be explained by the learning approach in psychology. (6 marks)

Exam Hint: To score well on this question, students must have sound knowledge and understanding of both classical conditioning and social learning theory and the ability to effectively apply the main features to the cases of Kym and Jermaine, using the material provided in the scenario.

13. A behavioural psychologist conducted a study investigating the phenomena of social learning. Within the procedure, they showed young children a film of a similarly-aged infant stroking a kitten. Whilst the participants were viewing the film, the psychologist made verbal comments on how kind the child on the screen was for petting the animal so gently. After the film had finished, the psychologist brought a real kitten into the room to observe how the participants behaved.

Explain what is meant by the social learning theory approach and explain how social learning may have occurred due to the procedure the behaviourist psychologist used in their investigation. (6 marks)

14. Discuss two limitations of social learning theory. (6 marks)

15. Outline and evaluate the behaviourist approach in psychology. (12/16 marks)

16. Discuss the social learning theory approach in psychology. (12/16 marks)

17. Outline and evaluate the influence of behaviourists, such as Pavlov and Skinner, to psychologists' understanding of human behaviour. (12/16 marks)

18. Discuss social learning theory. In your answer, draw comparisons to at least one other approach you have studied in psychology. (16 marks)

Exam Hint: If comparisons are made to other approaches, such as behavioural or cognitive, during the evaluative discussion, students must make sure that they align their response with why this is a strength or a limitation of the social learning theory.

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