

## **Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of two or more major theoretical approaches in psychology.**

As behaviourists emphasise the role of environmental factors in influencing behaviour through classical and operant conditioning, they believe all behaviour can be observed and measured. This is a reflection of Watson's rejection of introspectionism, that it invoked too many vague concepts that are difficult if not impossible to define. An obvious advantage of behaviourism is its ability to clearly define behaviour and to measure changes in behaviour. According to the law of parsimony, the fewer assumptions a theory makes, the better and the more credible it is. Behaviourism, therefore, looks for simple explanations of human behaviour from a very scientific standpoint. However, if behaviourism takes a scientific approach to behaviour and the aim of science is to predict and control behaviour, then this raises ethical questions about the power and role of psychologists as agents of change.

The influences of behaviourism are far-reaching. It has made, and continues to make, huge contributions in psychology. Behaviourism has not stood still and the original orthodox theories have been modified and built upon, making a huge contribution to various topics in psychology. These include insights into learning, language development, and moral and gender development, which have all been explained in terms of conditioning. The contribution of behaviourism can be seen in some of its practical applications. Behaviour therapy and behaviour modification represent one of the major approaches to the treatment of abnormal behaviour and are readily used in clinical psychology. Biofeedback as a non-medical treatment for stress-related symptoms, derived from attempts to change rats' autonomic physiological functions through the use of behavioural operant techniques, now has more practical uses in stress management techniques for humans. Teaching machines and programmed learning, which now commonly take the form of computer assisted learning, also have their roots in behaviourism.

Critics of the behaviourist approach point to problems with the famous 'Skinner box', the 'auto-environmental chamber' in which rats' and pigeons' environments can be totally controlled by the experimenter. Counting the number of lever presses (frequency of response) became the standard measure of operant learning. But by just concentrating on 'the response', operant conditioning ignores the intensity, duration and quality of 'the response' – in everyday life, frequency isn't always the most meaningful aspect of behaviour.

Secondly, critics point to Skinner's claim that human behaviour can be predicted and controlled in the same way as the behaviour of non-humans. Possessing language allows humans to communicate with each other and to think and consider non-observable concepts including laws, rules and principles. What people think is among the most important variables determining what they do and say, and this is the very opposite of what Skinner's radical behaviourism claims.

As with behaviourist accounts of conditioning, many of Freud's ideas and concepts have become part of mainstream psychology's vocabulary. Also like behaviourist theorists, Freud's psychodynamic approach has contributed greatly to many areas in psychology and he offers theories on motivation, dreams, forgetting, attachment and abnormality. His approach focuses upon the active forces within the personality that motivate behaviour and the inner causes of behaviour. Psychodynamic theorists see the root of all behaviour in the unconscious, and unwanted thoughts and desires are repressed into our unconscious. Early experiences in childhood are not to be underestimated and they have a significant effect upon our later personalities.

Fisher & Greenberg (1996) argue that Freud's theory should be evaluated in terms of specific hypotheses rather than as a whole. They concluded that there is evidence to support Freud's concepts of oral and anal personalities and some aspects of his ideas on depression and paranoia. They found little evidence for the Oedipal conflict and no support for Freud's views on women's sexuality and how their development differs from men's. Whilst Fisher and Greenberg's review is extremely broad, it is not comprehensive and the strength of the evidence presented is variable and sometimes indirect; where it is supportive, it is very subjective in its interpretation.

A major criticism made of the psychodynamic approach is that, unlike behaviourism, it is unscientific and unfalsifiable. However, Kline (1989) argues that the theory comprises a series of hypotheses, some of which are more easily tested than others, some more central to the theory than others, and some with more supporting evidence than others. Also, whilst the theory may not be easily tested, this does not mean that it does not have strong explanatory power. Freud's theories provide methods and ideas allowing the interpretation of meanings, so possibly provide a better understanding of human behaviour than more testable theories. It is this attempt to understand the human personality and mind from a unique position that has led to Freud's theories being seen as highly influential, and as Reason (2000) believes, it might be time to re-acknowledge Freud's greatness as a psychologist.