



THE LEARNING APPROACH

CLASSICAL CONDITIONING

An introduction to the learning approach and classical conditioning

An introduction to the approach

The Learning Approach is, if you like, the counterargument to the Biological Approach. It focuses on that which is learned from interaction with the environment. The approach studies how nurture shapes and develops an individual (see [4.3 The Nature-Nurture Debate](#))

Key assumptions of the learning approach

There are three key assumptions of this approach:

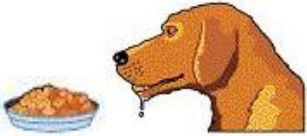


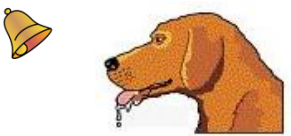
1. Behaviour is determined by learning experiences
2. The focus of the approach is on observable behaviours, investigation of mental processes and unconscious forces is seen as unscientific and untestable
3. There are three learning mechanisms: *conditioning*, *reinforcement* and *social learning*

You will meet each of the three mechanisms over the approach, where they are covered in more detail

Research methods used in the approach

The approach uses laboratory experiments on humans and animals in order to investigate behaviour. These experiments are used in because only lab experiments have the strong controls necessary to draw the cause-and-effect conclusions which have to be made to observe behaviour. For strengths and weaknesses of using animal experiments, see [M8 Animal Experiments](#), and for strengths and weaknesses of lab experiments see [M5 Experimental Design](#)

The term **classical conditioning** refers to the association of a response to its stimulus. Research into classical conditioning started with Ivan Pavlov. Classical conditioning works by building up an association between two stimuli, one which produces a certain response, and another which initially does not cause a response. Pavlov investigated classical conditioning in his dogs, when he noticed that they would salivate even when they just heard his footsteps, even though at the time he would not be carrying food, it was the association of him coming and him coming and carrying food that caused the salivating. The storyboard below outlines the steps involved in this conditioning:

	<p><i>The dog is presented with some food, so the dog salivates</i></p> <p>At this stage, the food is an unconditioned stimulus (UCS), which provokes the dog to salivate – this is an unconditioned response (UCR)</p>
	<p><i>A bell is rung, which causes no response from the dog</i></p> <p>The bell is a neutral stimulus (NS) – it has not been conditioned with another stimulus, and therefore causes no response within the dog</p>
	<p><i>The bell is rung, and the dog is presented with some food</i></p> <p>This causes the dog to salivate, because he is being presented with some food. The bell is still an NS, the food still a UCS and the salivation a UCR</p>
	<p>The bell keeps ringing each time food is presented. Eventually, even when the food is not there, the dog will still salivate at the sound of the bell: the bell has become a conditioned stimulus (CS) and the salivation a conditioned response (CR)</p>

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In the final stage there, classical conditioning has been achieved: an association between the ringing of the bell and the presentation of the food was made, so the dog would salivate each time at the ringing of the bell, even if there was no food presented to him.

Neutral stimulus -

a stimulus which has not been linked to another stimulus which causes a response, and therefore does not trigger a response

Unconditioned stimulus -

a stimulus which causes a natural response, usually a reflex action, such as blinking or salivation, which has not been conditioned

Unconditioned response -

a triggered response which is caused by an unconditioned stimulus, that has not been linked to a conditioned stimulus

Conditioned stimulus -

a trigger for a behaviour which produces a response only after being repeatedly paired to another stimulus

Conditioned response -

a response which appears as provoked by a certain trigger with which it has been repeatedly paired with

Spontaneous recovery -

the reappearance of a previously lost conditioned response when the conditioned stimulus is later introduced after a period of time

Sometimes, the association between the conditioned stimulus and the condition response might be lost. This process is called **extinction**. However, the conditioned response may reappear again in the future if it is recovered by the reintroduction of the conditioned stimulus: this is known as **spontaneous recovery**. An example of this using Pavlov's dogs would be that eventually, the bell ring alone would not cause the dogs to salivate. However, bringing back the bell ring alongside the food being presented would cause the conditioned response to be recovered.