

Contribution of Watson-1

The Subject Matter of Behaviorism

The primary subject matter for Watson's behavioral psychology was the elements of behavior; that is, the body's muscular movements and glandular secretions. As the science of behavior, psychology would deal only with acts that could be described objectively, without using subjective or mentalistic terminology.

Despite their stated goal of reducing all behavior to S-R units, ultimately behaviorists must strive to understand the organism's total behavior. For example, although a response can be as simple as a knee jerk, it can also be more complex. Watson called these more complex responses "acts." Act involves the organism's movement in space.

Responses can be either explicit or implicit. Explicit responses are overt and directly observable. Implicit responses, such as visceral movements, glandular secretions, and nerve impulses, occur inside the organism. Although not overt, they are still considered to be behavior. By including implicit responses, Watson was modifying his requirement that all of psychology's data be actually observable. He accepted that some items of behavior could be potentially observable. The movements or responses that occur within the organism are observable through the use of instruments. Thus, Watson's behavioral psychology investigates the behavior of the whole organism in relation to its environment. Specific laws of behavior can be proposed by first analyzing the S-R complexes into their elementary S-R units. Thus, in both methods and subject matter, Watson's behaviorism was an attempt to construct a science free of subjective notions and methods, a science as objective as physics.

Instincts

Initially Watson accepted the role of instincts in behavior. By 1925 Watson revised his position and eliminated the concept of instinct altogether. He argued that behaviors that seem instinctive are really socially conditioned responses. By adopting the view that learning, or conditioning, is the key to understanding all human development, Watson became an extreme environmentalist. And then he went further. Not only did he deny instincts, he refused to admit to his system any inherited capacities, temperaments, or talents of any kind.

Behaviors that seemed inherited were traced to early childhood training. For example, he argued that children were not born with the ability to be great athletes or musicians but were slanted in that direction by parents or caregivers who encouraged and reinforced the appropriate behaviors. This emphasis on the overwhelming nurturing effect of the parental and social environment was one reason for Watson's phenomenal popularity. He concluded, simply and optimistically, that children could be trained to be whatever one wanted them to be. There were no limitations imposed by genetic factors.

Emotions

To Watson, emotions were merely physiological responses to specific stimuli. A stimulus (such as a person suddenly threatening you with bodily harm) produces internal physical changes such as rapid heart rate along with the appropriate learned overt responses. This explanation for emotions denies any conscious perception of the emotion or the sensations from the internal organs.