Overview of the Behaviouristic Approach

Assumptions:

- **Behaviour is the only valid data in psychology.** This is because behaviour is observable and can therefore be measured objectively. 'Objectively' in this case means in an unbiased way.
- **Subjectivity should be eliminated from psychology.** Subjective data is that which comes from ones own mind and is therefore biased. Introspection is a subjective method that involves close personal reflection and reporting. Behaviourism rejects introspection as a method of data collection.
- **Learning can be understood in terms of external causes rather than internal causes.** Environmental influences are seen as the roots for learning and mental activities are considered useless as data.
- **Behaviour is almost entirely determined by the environment.** Genetic basis for behaviour are rejected and behaviour is seen to be purely learned.
- **Simple stimulus-response associations are the building blocks of all behaviour, no matter how complex.**
- **Laws of learning are the same for all species and can be seen in any environment.** Much of the behaviourism research involves experiments with animals.

Key concepts:

- **Classical conditioning.** This is learning through association. See Pavlov (1927)
- **Operant conditioning.** This is learning through reinforcement and punishment. See Skinner (1948)

Methods:

- **Laboratory experiments.** These are central to the behaviouristic approach as only under laboratory conditions can we "control" the environment. In striving to make psychology a science Behaviourism obligates the use of scientific/empirical methods. Many such experiments also investigate non-human animal behaviour.

Evaluation:

- **(+) Behaviourism has been very influential.** Modern psychology still relies heavily on scientific methods that were first proposed by Watson's (1913) Behaviourist Manifesto.
- **(+) Practical applications.** Behaviourism has given rise to numerous therapeutic applications.
- **(-) The approach is seen as mechanistic.** Human beings are complex animals, we feel emotions, we live in complex societies etc. To see humans as functioning in a mechanistic manner is to over-simplify human behaviour.
- **(-) It excludes innate factors.** We now know that genetic factors do play an enormous role in influencing human behaviour and behaviourism simply does not acknowledge this.
- **(-) It is deterministic and reductionist.** The approach rejects the notion of free will, that we actively choose how to behave. Reductionist means that the approach takes complex behaviours and tries to explain them in simplistic ways (e.g. S-R).
- **(-) Based on work with non-human animals.** The approach has been criticised for making generalisations about human beings based on experiments on non-human animals.