

Learning Perspective

1. Describe how one historical or cultural condition helped to give rise to the learning perspective. [8 marks]

Model answer

One historical condition that helped to give rise to the learning perspective was Watson's article from 1913 titled 'Psychology as the behaviourist views it'. Although the article did not make a major impact on psychology at once, the ideas of psychology as a true science was to influence behaviourism eventually. The article went against 'mentalism' in psychology and the lack of scientific rigour in e.g. psychoanalysis. Watson wrote that the aim of psychology should be 'to predict and control behaviour', that only overt behaviour should be the object of study and that rigorous scientific methods should be used in the study of behaviour. It was exactly this heavy focus on behaviour that paved the road for what has become known as behaviourism. Watson was probably inspired with Pavlov's work on 'classical conditioning' and the theoretical explanation of behaviour that focused on the importance of the environment in determining behaviour. The theory of classical conditioning provided Watson with a theory that could support his ideas of psychology as a true science and he wanted to search for 'the grand theory' of behaviour in psychology, i.e. a universal law of learning. With a behaviourist manifesto expressing exactly this and eventually rigorously controlled experiments done along these lines such as e.g. Watson and Raynor (1920) on conditioned emotional responses, Watson demonstrated how psychology could be a real science just like the natural sciences. This was his aim and for a long period his ideas were followed within the behaviourist paradigm that was to become a very important school of psychology in the US where behaviourist explanations of behaviour were for a long period of time accepted as the only valid explanations.

(278 words)

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2. (a) Outline one psychological question which may be explained using the learning perspective [3 marks]
(b) Evaluate the effectiveness of the learning perspective explanation of the psychological question identified in part (a). [5 marks]

Model answer

- (a) One psychological question which may be explained using the learning perspective could be aggression. Social learning theory suggested by Albert Bandura in the 1960s claimed that aggression could be learned by watching a model. The idea in social learning theory was that learning is social, i.e. you learn not only via reinforcement but also by watching what happens to other people, i.e. vicarious learning by modelling.
- (b) Bandura tested SLT experimentally (Bandura et al. 1961). In the experiment, children watched models behave aggressively towards a Bobo doll and when they were later put in a room with a Bobo doll, they tended to exhibit the same behaviour as the models. Bandura found that the sex of the model had an impact in that children tended to imitate same sex models more. All in all, social learning theory seemed to be supported in the experiments and also that aggression could be learned. The effectiveness of the explanation provided by Bandura on the basis of his experiments has been challenged due to methodological considerations of the experiment as well as ethical problems in the experiments. First of all, a rigorously controlled experiment like this one do have problems with artificiality. The children were perhaps not behaving naturally since they were put in this artificial situation, and it has been argued that there was a problem of demand characteristics. Furthermore, it is not possible to say if they exhibited aggression long term or if it was just in that situation so it is questioned if aggression was really learned, i.e. if it was 'a relatively permanent change in behaviour'. Although most psychologists do accept that some learning is social, learning to be aggressive may be much more complex than just watching a model. It could be, e.g., that some people are more inclined to be violent than others and this is not accounted for in the theory. The problem of learned violence is raised in the debate on media violence where researchers do not agree on the impact on watching violent videos or playing violent video games.

(word count 345)