
Q. Outline and Evaluate the Behavioural Approach to Explaining Phobias [16]

Ans.

Mowrer proposed the two-process model of development of phobias. The first process, that of classical conditioning, explains how phobias are first acquired. It suggests that an unconditioned stimulus (UCS) that naturally evokes fear is associated with a neutral stimulus (NS) that does not naturally evoke fear. Eventually, the fear response, that is the unconditioned response (UCR) towards the UCS is given towards the NS as well such that the NS is converted into a conditioned stimulus (CS). This has been demonstrated in the classic study of Little Albert by Watson and Rayner. Albert was a nine-month old infant naturally afraid (UCR) of loud noises (UCS). Researchers Watson and Rayner conducted a procedure with him such that they kept making a loud noise while presenting a white rat (NS) to him over several trials. It was found that Albert who was initially not afraid of the white rat, began to fear the white rat (CS) by the end of the procedure. It was said that Albert had become classically conditioned into developing a phobia of white rats. The second process, that of operant conditioning explains how phobias once acquired are maintained in the long run. It proposes that once a phobia is acquired, avoidance behaviour is shown towards the feared stimulus. For example, if a child has developed phobia of a white rat, it will do its best to avoid encountering the white rat. This avoidance proves to be negatively reinforcing. That is, the avoidance helps encountering an unpleasant experience of having to face a white rat which provokes great anxiety and this proves to be indirectly rewarding to the child.

One strength of the behavioural approach is that it has resulted in the development of behavioural therapies of phobia that have been found to be highly successful in treatment. For example, the famous systematic desensitisation therapy, based on classical conditioning, presented by Wolpe is based on this approach. In this therapy, the association between the UCS and CS is broken such that the CS no longer provokes a fear response. Rather, the phobic patient is trained to associate the CS with a UCS that naturally evokes relaxation and calm. Then the response of relaxation given to the UCS is given to the CS as well after training, putting an end to the phobia. For example, if a child has associated a white rat (CS) with a loud noise (UCS), they can now be taught, in systematic desensitisation, to associate the white rat (CS) with muscle relaxation or deep breathing (UCS), which will result in a response of relaxation towards the white rat as well.

One weakness of this approach is that it is reductionist because it does not account for the contribution of nature towards phobias. It has been well-established in genetic research that inheriting a denovo mutation can increase disposition towards developing anxiety disorders like phobias. This mutation results in duplication of a segment of genes on chromosome 15 known as DUP25 which causes malfunctioning of the NTRK3 gene. Ultimately this results in malfunctioning of NT3 neurotrophin receptors, causing excessive release of noradrenaline, heightening alertness and arousal in an individual, making them more prone to giving fear reactions and developing phobias. It is highly possible, therefore, that having a predisposition towards phobia by inheriting the denovo mutation, when an individual is exposed to association between a UCS that naturally evokes fear and CS is when they develop phobia. So, phobia is likely to be a combined result of the disposition and exposure to classical conditioning.

One strength is that research into the behavioural approach has been highly scientific, lending validity to the explanation. For example, the study on Little Albert described above was done in a highly controlled environment with manipulation of key variables by the researchers. That is, all trials were done in a laboratory setting where it was ensured that only the loud noise created by researchers and no other variables such as how agitated the rat was or presence of other fearful stimuli in the environment could cause induction of phobia in Albert. They manipulated the presentation of the loud noise (UCS) just immediately after the presentation of the white rat (CS) to ensure that the association was made between these two stimuli only. So the fear that Albert developed could be confidently attributed to this UCS only, increasing the validity of classical conditioning being the reason for acquisition of phobias.