



## Behaviourism

### Core definition

School of psychology that explains human behaviour by studying observable and measurable responses to environmental stimuli.

### Longer explanation

In a nutshell, behaviourists believe that the best way to understand people is to study their behaviours. Behaviourists put little credibility in psycho-analytic approaches that focus on consciousness, mental states, and feelings. Understanding individuals through introspection or self-reflection is seen as too vague and subjective to be of use in the science of psychology. Behaviourists also believe that all behaviours can be learned or unlearned by changing stimuli, that is through the use of positive or negative reinforcements (operant conditioning). In *The Simpsons*, Lisa uses operant conditioning to determine which is smarter, Bart or a hamster. To do this she sees how long it takes for each to learn to avoid food that gives them an electric shock – not surprisingly, the hamster won.

### Debates and controversies

Behaviourism became a key strand of psychology in the twentieth century, but is not without criticism. Many feel that the controlled and clinical nature of behaviourist studies limits its application in the real world. Unlike a maze navigated by a rat, the real world is not a controlled environment. The dismissal of anything not observable is also seen as problematic since this is at odds with mainstay psycho-analytic approaches. Finally, the ethicality of some behaviourist therapies is highly questionable. In the 1950s and 1960s it was not uncommon to try to 'cure' homosexuality. And aversion therapy, which involved administering nauseating drugs or electric shocks to gay men as they looked at pictures of naked men, was thought to be an effective cure.

### Practical application

While we've gratefully moved past aversion therapy as a treatment for sexual 'deviance', behaviourist approaches, for example desensitizing individuals to their phobias, are often used to elicit behavioural change. But even more

common is the belief in 'behaviourism' outside clinical psychology. The concept of modifying behaviours through reward and punishment is central to our processes of **socialization**, child-rearing, and rehabilitation, and can be found in virtual all institutions from the family, to the workplace, to the prison.

## Key figures

You may have heard of Ivan Pavlov whose dogs were conditioned to salivate at the ringing of a bell. Pavlov rang a bell when his dogs sighted food, and eventually removed the food as a stimulus but kept the bell. The dogs salivated nonetheless, showing that reflexes could be learned. Other famous behaviourists include J. B. Watson, who was the first Western psychologist to fully articulate behaviourism, and his student B. F. Skinner, who believed that operant conditioning could cure both individual anxieties and social ills.

*Of course, Behaviorism 'works' ... Just give  
me a no-nonsense, down-to-earth  
behaviorist, a few drugs, and simple  
electrical appliances...*

**W. H. Auden** (1907–1973) Anglo-American  
poet – in 'Behaviorism',  
*A Certain World* (1970)

## Recommended reading

Good choices in contemporary overviews include *Understanding Behaviorism: Behavior, Culture, and Evolution* (Baum 2004) and *The Philosophical Legacy of Behaviorism* (Thyer 2006). But if you want to get a sense of the behaviourism's foundations, try Watson's *Behaviourism (1930 1998)* and Skinner's *Beyond Dignity and Freedom (1971 2002)*.



## (The) Body

### Core definition

Physical or material structure of an individual, increasingly recognized as a social/cultural entity as well as biological one.

### Longer explanation

Philosophers and sociologists have often separated the body from the mind, the body from the spirit, the body from consciousness, and the body from society. The body was left to anatomists, medical professionals, and even artists. But this is changing. Today, the body is recognized as central to understanding both the **self** and the social world. We now recognize that the world sees and reacts to our physical form, which can affect our self-esteem, our interpersonal interactions, and our position in the world. Perhaps even more interesting is that the body is no longer accepted as an immutable physical reality. We now have the ability to unmake and remake ourselves in order to change our opportunities. Our obsession with dieting, the proliferation of bodybuilding, and the increase in cosmetic surgery are examples of how we can change ourselves ... and change how others see and react to us. For the wealthy, even getting old is becoming an option.

### Debates and controversies

Most constructs have a defined history, but the body is a relatively new and broad 'social science' construct. So offering a precise definition is quite difficult. But perhaps understanding the body as an isolated social science construct is not the goal. Perhaps the goal is to understand how the self, with mind and body inextricably linked, is entwined in all our social and cultural interactions and is instrumental in understanding every aspect of humans as social beings.

### Practical application

I think there are two key ways the body can have practical application in the social sciences. First, key understandings of the social world have not generally integrated the construct of the body into these understandings, so there's an opportunity to add complexity, richness and depth to virtually all realms of existing social knowledge. Second, there are a host of contemporary social

issues where the body has a starring role. Whether it be body image, eating disorders, dieting obsession, medical ethics (i.e. cloning or assisted suicide), the list of absolutely fascinating body-related social issues is unending.

## Key figures

Recognition of the importance of the body to our social understandings has come from postmodern theorists like Michel Foucault, who saw the body as a site for surveillance, discipline and control, feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir, who saw women as prisoners of their bodies, and more mainstream sociologists like Bryan Turner, who believe the body should be the axis of sociological analysis.

*I definitely believe in plastic surgery.*

*I don't want to be an old hag.*

*There's no fun in that.*

**Scarlett Johansson** (1984–)

American actress – attributed

## Recommended reading

There are a number of interesting works that offer a good introduction to 'the body' as a social science construct: *The Body and Society* (Turner 1996), *The Body and Social Theory* (Shilling 2003) and *Real Bodies: A Sociological Introduction* (Evans and Lee 2002). But I'd also have a look at magazines such as *Vogue*, *WHO*, *Penthouse*, or any other magazine that shows the importance of the body in contemporary society.



## Bureaucracy

### Core definition

A complex administration system designed to help an organization reach its goals efficiently.

### Longer explanation

Bureaucracies are organizations characterized by specialized duties and professional salaried roles; hierarchical structures of **authority** with formal rules and regulations; thorough documentation; recruitment and promotion based on qualifications and merit; impersonal relationships; and authority vested in offices rather than individuals. And while all this is designed for efficiency, it doesn't always work. The word 'bureaucracy' can definitely have a negative connotation and this is because bureaucratic systems have a tendency to become so dense they actually impede effective action. Now for us, bureaucratic red tape is a reality. We've grown up with bureaucratic governments, agencies, institutions, and corporations. So while we might complain bitterly when caught up in pedantic bureaucratic regulations, we realize this is how the world works. But when theorists like Max Weber first explored bureaucracies, this was not the case. At the turn of the twentieth century, the growth of bureaucracies represented a shift from traditional to more rational systems of administration. The impact this might have on both individuals and social institutions was a significant question of the day.

### Debates and controversies

So is the modern bureaucracy good or bad, efficient or inefficient, equitable or unjust, organized or unresponsive? There's probably a bit of truth in all the above. Yes, specialization can lead to expertise, but it can also lead to compartmentalized thinking; hierarchical authority and formal rules should efficiently standardize work practices, but there's usually a way to skirt around rules and hide behind regulations at the expense of organizational goals; thorough documentation should lead to accountability, but it's amazing how common it is to pass the buck; impersonal relationships should lead to equity, but they can also lead to **alienation** and **anomie**. The system has its flaws and even its strengths can be exploited.

## Practical application

There are two major questions social scientists can ask here: (1) given that bureaucracies are a reality of a *modern* and even *post-modernizing* world (see *modernity* and *postmodernity*) how can they best operate so that goals do not get lost to an administrative system? In other words, what do contemporary bureaucracies need to learn about *governance*?; (2) Do we have other choices? Are there alternative ways for our institutions to meet their goals without going down the bureaucratic highway?

## Key figures

Weber is certainly a key figure here and offers a comprehensive portrait of the modern bureaucracy. But I also find Foucault, who saw the proliferation of databases, records, and documents as a means of bureaucratic surveillance and control over the individual, incredibly interesting.

*Join in the new game that's sweeping  
the country. It's called 'Bureaucracy'  
Everybody stands in a circle.  
The first person to do anything loses.*

**Anonymous**

## Recommended reading

Contemporary works look at everything from the value of modern bureaucracies (see *In Praise of Bureaucracy* (du Gay 2000) and *The Case for Bureaucracy* (Goodsell 2003)) to our potential to move beyond them (see *The End of Bureaucracy* and *the Rise of the Intelligent Organization* (Pinchot and Pinchot 1994)). But I'd also turn to the classics, for example Weber's seminal work *Economy and Society* (pt 2, ch 9) (1921–22 1978) and Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (pt 3) (1977 1995).