The behavioural approach
Assumptions of the approach

First assumption

Psychology should be about studying observable behaviour. This is different to the cognitive and psychodynamic approaches that study processes happening in the mind. A behaviourist does not focus on the mind but simply on how people (and animals) behave and how their behaviour changes in response to their environment. This approach is sometimes called a stimulus-response model, shown below.

![Diagram of stimulus-response model]

Anything in the environment
That is detected by the organism
The person or animal
What the person or animal does in response

Second assumption

Behaviour is acquired from the environment by processes of learning. A wide range of organisms from humans to sea slugs learn by the same processes. We can for example learn to associate two stimuli together, by reward and punishment and by imitation. To elaborate this point, choose one of the three types of learning shown below and explain it with an example.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of learning</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classical conditioning</td>
<td>Learning to associate two stimuli together so that we respond to one as we did the other</td>
<td>Learning a fear of dogs by associating the sight of a dog with the pain of getting bitten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operant conditioning</td>
<td>Learning to repeat behaviour or not by reward and punishment</td>
<td>Learning to complete homework after getting a good mark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observational learning</td>
<td>Learning new behaviours by observing and imitating them</td>
<td>Learning aggression by copying a favourite film star</td>
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</tbody>
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Social learning theory of aggression

**Definition**

Social learning is ________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________

Aggression is ________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________

**The basic ideas**

Back in the 1960s Albert Bandura demonstrated that children who witnessed an adult hitting and shouting at an inflatable doll tended to imitate them. He proposed that they learned the aggressive behaviour by a process of **observational learning**. Observational learning involves watching a model demonstrate a behaviour and then imitating it.

**The four processes of observational learning**

Bandura (1977) suggested that four processes are necessary for observational learning to take place.

- attention – the model must actually be observed
- retention – the observer must remember what they have seen
- reproduction – the observer must be able to repeat the behaviour they have seen
- motivation – the observer must have a reason to perform the new action eg. They might be rewarded for doing so or witness the model being rewarded.

**Exercise:** Explain the following scenario in terms of **attention, retention, reproduction and motivation**.

Little Johnny watches the playground bully beat someone up at school. He sees the way other children fear and respect the bully. The next day he attacks a small child.

________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________
Who makes a good model?

We don't imitate just anyone. Several factors increase the likelihood that an observer will perform a behaviour that they have observed.

Exercise: which of these might be more likely to have their aggressive behaviour imitated? Why?

Observers are more likely to imitate models who they aspire to be like. So individuals with these characteristics, such as adults (high status), peers (same age) and characters on TV (powerful and likeable), are all potentially effective models.

The importance of motivation

The probability of the behaviour actually being performed is also influenced by external events, for example it is more likely if:

- if the observer is rewarded directly for trying out the behaviour (this is called reinforcement).
- observer has seen the model being rewarded for the behaviour (this is called vicarious reinforcement)
Systematic desensitisation: a behavioural therapy

Definition
Systematic desensitisation is a behavioural therapy commonly used to treat phobias.

Basic ideas
Behaviourists see some conditions like phobias as learned responses. The idea of behavioural therapies is to unlearn a response or learn a new response in its place.

We cannot experience two conflicting emotions at the same time. For example we cannot be anxious and relaxed at the same time. This is called reciprocal inhibition – each emotion inhibits the other. It follows therefore that if we can make someone relaxed then we should be able to take away their anxiety.

Linking back to the behavioural approach
In a question on any therapy it is essential to explain how it is linked into its approach. Thinking back to the two behavioural assumptions explain how REBT links to each:

1. Behavioural psychology is concerned with stimulus and response not with mental processes.

__________________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________________

2. Behavioural psychologists explain behaviour as being learnt from the environment.

__________________________________________________________________________________

The process of the therapy
Systematic desensitisation involves 3 stages:

1. The anxiety hierarchy
   The patient and therapist will agree a sequence of situations in which the patient is exposed to the phobic stimulus, ranging from the mildest to the most feared. This is called the anxiety hierarchy.
**Exercise:** draw up an anxiety hierarchy for a phobia of your choice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of hierarchy</th>
<th>Situation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
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<td>8</td>
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</table>

2. **Relaxation**

Relaxation can be achieved by drugs like Valium or by meditation, hypnosis, guided fantasy or progressive muscle relaxation. Once a patient is deeply relaxed they can be exposed to the phobic stimulus.

3. **Exposure**

Once the patient is relaxed they can gradually be exposed to the phobic stimulus, working up the anxiety hierarchy. We can carry out desensitisation in real life situations (in vivo) or in controlled conditions (in vitro). In vivo works better so with something straightforward like dogs in a park we would probably do it this way. However, sometimes the phobia is for something like heights or flying, which would be impractical to tackle this way. In these cases we would use in vitro desensitisation. This is now often carried out using virtual reality.
Methodology

1. **Lab experiments using humans**

Let’s remind ourselves what a lab is and what an experiment is first of all.

A laboratory is _____________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________

An experiment is ______________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________

**An example of a human lab experiment**

Bandura *et al* (1961) studied the effect of modelling of aggressive behaviour on children’s behaviour. They showed children an adult shouting at an inflatable bobo doll. They then mildly annoyed the them in a room with a range of toys including a bobo doll.

Children who had watched the adult behaving aggressively were more likely to attack the bobo doll.

**Exercise**

Identify the independent and dependent variables in the Bandura et al study.

IV ____________________________________ DV ________________________________________

**How are lab experiments with humans used in the behavioural approach?**

Lab experiments are used in several approaches to psychology. In the behavioural approach psychologists are interested in researching how behaviour can be altered by the environment. In each condition the environment will be different in some key way and what is measured is an observable behaviour. For example in the Bandura et al study the behaviour being studied was aggression. This is an observable behaviour measured by recording observed punching, kicking, shouting etc.
Evaluation of laboratory experiments with humans

* You must explain in a question on the methodology of the behavioural approach how it used in this approach in particular

Strengths

Weaknesses
2. Lab experiments using animals

Behaviourists really like experimental research. Because the kinds of learning they are interested in take place in a large range of species there is no good reason why experiments can’t be carried out on animals as well as humans.

An example of a lab experiment using animals

Pavlov conditioned dogs to salivate (dribble) in response to a range of stimuli. He presented them with food that triggered salivation and also presented a second stimulus, like a metronome ticking. After a while he found that the sound of the metronome was sufficient to make the dogs dribble without food. Pavlov concluded that the dogs had learnt to associate food with the metronome.

How are animal experiments used in the behavioural approach?

To a behaviourist humans and animals learn in much the same ways, so it is possible to study the learning of behaviours in animals and generalise the findings to humans. Actually sometimes behaviourists prefer to study animals for the sake of experimental control. We can completely control an animal’s environment from birth, meaning we can have really good levels of control.
Strengths & weaknesses of the approach

Strengths

1. It has practical value:
   (a) Systematic desensitisation:

   (b) A scientific basis to media censorship:

2. It is good science:
   (a) It uses laboratory experiments as the main research method. This is good science because

   (b) Behavioural theories and ideas can be tested and for which there are supporting evidence.

   For example...

Weaknesses

1. It is reductionist:

   Specifically, behavioural psychology is often guilty of stimulus-response reductionism. It reduces the complexity of human nature to thinking of us as simply a series of responses to the environment. It therefore ignores the importance of...
2. It takes an extreme position on the nature-nurture debate:
What can I be asked?

These are the questions you could be asked in relation to the cognitive approach.

1.  (a) Outline two assumptions of the behavioural approach. [4]  
    (b) Describe social learning theory as an explanation for aggression. [8]

2.  Describe how the behavioural approach has been applied in either systematic desensitisation or aversion therapy. [12]

3.  (a) Evaluate two strengths of the behavioural approach. [6]  
    (b) Evaluate two weaknesses of the behavioural approach. [6]

4.  Compare and contrast the behaviourist and XXXXXXXXXX approaches. [12]

5.  Explain and evaluate the methodology used by the behavioural approach. [12]

What other resources do I need to prepare for this exam?

We can provide you with the following:

- A set of exam questions with mark schemes
- All the past exam papers with mark schemes
- Bullet point essay plans
- Sample answers to mark yourself
- Pro formas for question planning
- Presentations on tackling tricky questions

You should be able to find all these on i-Learn.