
Person of the Issue: John B. Watson (1878-1958)

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Born	January 9, 1878 Travelers Rest, South Carolina
Died	September 25, 1958 (aged 80) New York City, New York
Nationality	American
Doctoral advisor	J. R. Angell ¹
Education	University of Chicago



John B. Watson grew up in South Carolina. While he later described himself as a poor student, he entered Furman University at the age of 16. After graduating five years later with a master's degree, he began studying psychology at the University of Chicago. Watson earned his Ph.D. in psychology in 1903.

Watson began teaching psychology at John Hopkins University in 1908. In 1913, he gave a seminal lecture at Columbia University titled *Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It*, which essentially detailed the behaviorist position.

According to John Watson, psychology should be the science of observable behavior. "Psychology as the behaviorist views it is a purely objective experimental branch of natural science. Its theoretical goal is the prediction and control of behavior. Introspection forms no essential part of its methods, nor is the scientific value of its data dependent upon the readiness with which they lend themselves to interpretation in terms of consciousness," he explained (1913).

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¹Classics in the History of Psychology": "Watson obtained his Ph.D. under the supervision of Angell 1903.

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Watson remained at John Hopkins University until 1920. He had an affair with Rayner, divorced his first wife and was then asked by the university to resign his position. Watson later married Rayner and the two remained together until her death in 1935. After leaving his academic position, Watson began working for an advertising agency where he remained until he retired in 1945.

During the later part of his life, John Watson's already poor relationships with his children grew progressively worse. He spent his last years living a reclusive life on a farm in Connecticut. Shortly before his death, he burned many of his unpublished personal papers and letters.

Contributions to Psychology

Watson set the stage for behaviorism, which soon rose to dominate psychology. While behaviorism began to lose its hold after 1950, many of the concepts and principles are still widely used today. Conditioning and behavior modification are still widely used in therapy and behavioral training to help clients change problematic behaviors and develop new skills.

Watson earned his Ph. D. from the University of Chicago in 1903. In his dissertation, "Animal Education: An Experimental Study on the Psychological Development of the White Rat, Correlated with the Growth of its Nervous System" he described the relationship between brain myelination and learning ability in rats at different ages. Watson showed that the degree of myelination was largely related to wand learning. He discovered that the kinesthetic sense controlled the behavior of rats running in mazes. In 1908, Watson was offered and accepted a faculty position at Johns Hopkins University and was immediately promoted to chair of the psychology department.

"Little Albert" experiment (1920)

In his most famous and controversial experiment, known today as the "Little Albert" experiment, John Watson and a graduate assistant named Rosalie Rayner conditioned a small child to fear a white rat. They accomplished this by repeatedly pairing the white rat with a loud, frightening clanging noise. They were also able to demonstrate that this fear could be generalized to other white, furry objects. The ethics of the experiment are often criticized today, especially because the child's fear was never deconditioned.

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In 2009, researchers were able to identify Little Albert as a boy named Douglas Merritte. The question of what happened to the child had intrigued many for decades. Sadly, the researchers found that the child died at age six of hydrocephalus, a medical condition in which fluid builds up inside the skull.

In 2012, researchers presented evidence that Merritte suffered from neurological impairments at time of the Little Albert experiment and that Watson may have knowingly misrepresented the boy as a "healthy" and "normal" infant.

Timeline

Years	Happenings
9 Jan 1878	John B. Watson was born in Greenville, South Carolina.
1 Jan 1891	Watson's father left the family.
1 Jan 1894	Got acceptance from Furman University.
1 Jan 1899	Graduated from Furman University.
Jan 1 1900	Began studying at Chicago University.
Jan 1 1901	Watson majored in psychology and minored in philosophy and neurology at the University of Chicago.
Jan 2 1901	He married Mary Ikes.
Jan 1 1903	Graduated from Chicago University with a PhD in experimental psychology.
Jan 1 1905	Dr. Watson's first child, Mary, was born.
Jan 1 1905	Enrolled at John Hopkins University.
Jan 1 1906	Watson was hired as an instructor at the University of Chicago
Jan 1 1907	Watson was hired as an associate professor of psychology at John Hopkins University. (It was here that he became known as the Founder of Behaviorism.)
Jan 1 1914	He published Behavior: An Introduction to Comparative Psychology.
Jan 1 1914	Watson became the President of the American Psychological Association.
Jan 1 1916	Dr. Watson began his study on mental illnesses.
Jan 1 1919	Watson published Psychology From the Standpoint of a Behaviorists.

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Jan 1 1920	Watson was dismissed from John Hopkins University
Jan 1 1920	He published the "Little Albert" Experiment.
Jan 1 1921	Moved to New York.
Jan 1 1924	Watson became Vice President of J Walter Thompson Agency.
	He published Behaviorism.
Jan 1 1928	Watson published the Psychological Care of Infant and Child.
Jan 1 1945	He retired as Vice President of William Esty Agency.
Jan 1 1957	John Watson was awarded the gold medal from the American Psychological Association for his contributions to the field of psychology.
Sep 25 1958	Watson died in New York City.

"Give me a dozen healthy infants, well-formed, and my own specified world to bring them up in and I'll guarantee to take any one at random and train him to become any type of specialist I might select--doctor, lawyer, artist, merchant-chief, and, yes, even beggarman and thief, regardless of his talents, penchants, tendencies, abilities, vocations, and race of his ancestors. I am going beyond my facts and I admit it, but so have the advocates of the contrary and they have been doing it for many thousands of years."

–John B. Watson, Behaviorism, 1930

Achievements and Awards

- 1915 – Served as the President of the American Psychological Association (APA)
- 1919 – Published *Psychology From the Standpoint of a Behaviorist*
- 1925 – Published *Behaviorism*
- 1928 – Published *Psychological Care of Infant and Child*
- 1957 – Received the APA's award for contributions to psychology

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