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Watson, John



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John Broadus Watson (1878–1958). In a recent study of the 100 most eminent psychologists of the twentieth century, Watson was ranked 17th among such pioneers as B.F. Skinner, Jean Piaget, and Carl Rogers (Haggbloom et al. 2002). Known as the father of behaviorism, Watson's influence involved the codification and publication of behaviorism into prominence within the field of psychology as well as the initiation of the movement away from purely introspective methodology in psychological research. Still, it may be argued that Watson's views are often misunderstood, oversimplified, or biased by subsequent generations (Malone 2017).

Early Life and Educational Background

Watson was born on January 9, 1878, outside of Greenville, South Carolina, in a small city called Travelers Rest. He died on September 25, 1958, in Woodbury, Connecticut. The second of five children, Watson was primarily raised by his mother Emma, a devout Baptist (Houk 2000). Emma Watson moved the family to Greenville after Watson's father abandoned the family. At age

16, Watson entered Furman University, where he took his first foray into the field of psychology with a few introductory courses (Wozniak 1997). He was considered somewhat “nonconformist” by many of his professors and had to stay an extra year at the university after failing one of his courses (“John Broadus Watson” 2018). Watson himself noted that he was uninterested in many of his college courses (Watson 1936). He completed his master of arts degree at Furman in 1899. His mother died shortly after his graduation, and he then spent a year serving as a principal of a small private school before pursuing graduate studies (Wozniak 1997).

Watson arrived at the University of Chicago in 1900 amidst the revitalization of the department of philosophy, which housed the psychology program. The department was headed by John Dewey, who was conducting landmark educational studies at the University of Chicago Laboratory School (Gouinlock 2018). Before leaving the university in 1904, Dewey would attract a number of notable figures to the faculty of the department, including George Herbert Mead, Addison Moore, and James Rowland Angell. The latter was also the director of the psychology laboratory (Wozniak 1997).

While Watson completed his graduate studies, the prevailing approach to psychological research at the University of Chicago was functionalism (Wozniak 1997). Watson was mentored by Angell in his Ph.D. studies and assisted the professor with experiments on behaviors of rats and monkeys.

Watson's writings reflect greater comfort with the use of animals as experimental subjects relative to use of human participants (1936). Watson's academic advisor was Jacques Loeb, and his dissertation was an investigation of learning processes in rats (Cohn 2014). Watson's dissertation analyses revealed that rats have the ability to learn, even when still in infancy (Todd 2005). Watson reasoned that this information could be applied more broadly, proposing that human infants may possess considerable, unexplored capacity for learning. This assertion, which Watson would further explore in later writings, demonstrated that Watson was drawing on a combination of ideas and theories, from functionalism to philosophy (Todd 2005).

Watson graduated with his Ph.D. in Experimental Psychology in 1903 from the University of Chicago, the youngest person to earn a Ph.D. at the university at that point (Malone 2017). After matriculating, Watson remained at the university until 1908, first as an assistant to Angell and then as a faculty member (Kreshel 1990). During this time, Watson married Mary Ickes, one of his former students (John Broadus Watson 2018). The two would go on to have two children. It was also during this time period that Watson's behaviorism began to evolve and take a more definitive shape (Woodworth 1959).

Professional Career

In 1908, Watson took up the posts of professor of psychology and director of the psychological laboratory at Johns Hopkins University. At the time, Watson was the youngest full professor on the faculty (Todd 2005). In 1909, Robert Yerkes came to Johns Hopkins as a visiting scientist, and he and Watson formed a friendship. During his time at Johns Hopkins, Yerkes and Watson worked together to create tools and methodology to examine visual discrimination in animals (Wozniak 1997). In fact, their discrimination method remained the standard technique used by laboratories focusing on comparative psychology for the next several years. Watson also collaborated with Yerkes on the development of the

Journal of Animal Behavior. Throughout this period, Watson's commitment to behaviorism, as well as his frustrations with mainstream psychologists, was deepening (Wozniak 1997).

In 1913, Watson would deliver one of his most well-known lectures entitled "Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It." The article was written in late 1912 and was presented as part of a lecture series given by Watson on the subject of animal psychology at Columbia University (Samelson 1981). The accompanying article was published in the *Psychological Review* approximately 1 month later.

Later dubbed the Behaviorist Manifesto, Watson's "Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It" was a call to his contemporaries in the field of psychology to abandon introspection and consciousness as the primary methods of research. Instead, he asserted that there is no discernable difference between humans and animals, such that inferences may be made about human behavior by observing that of animals. Watson claims that the failure of psychology lies in the failure to claim a place in the field of science, mainly due to the emphasis that is placed on studying introspection and consciousness. Watson also noted that structuralism and functionalism had failed to demarcate psychology as a competitive member of the scientific world (Todd 2005). He also asserts that turning to research methods that emphasize observations of behavior would help to solve the principal problems that existed in the field of psychology at the time (Watson 1913).

Finally, this lecture, which would eventually engender Watson with the title of "father of behaviorism," also contained his argument for the reassessment of the goals of psychology. Watson believed that psychology should go farther than description and understanding and instead focus on prediction and control (Kreshel 1990). Watson would later build on these ideas in his work in the field of advertising.

Though "Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It" is often presented as a groundbreaking moment in the field, Watson's main objective was to provide a rationale to legitimize the behavioral research methods that had already been in practice (Wozniak 1997). In fact, there is little evidence

that Watson's paper caused an immediate upheaval within the field. However, the paper was representative of Watson's strong stance on the importance of using objective, observable research methodology as a contrast to the introspective report that prevailed in the field. By the 1950s, behaviorism would serve as the dominant perspective in American psychology (Samelson 1981).

Building upon the arguments and assertions in "Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It," Watson published his first book, *Behavior: A Textbook of Comparative Psychology* in 1914. In it, he maintains the importance of utilizing animal subjects in psychological research. He also argued that conditioned responses may be effective tools in experimental designs ("John B. Watson" 2019).

As his academic prestige continued to grow, so did Watson's presence in the field. He became the president of the American Psychological Association in 1915 and would serve as the editor of the *Journal of Animal Behavior*, the *Psychological Review*, and the *Journal of Experimental Psychology* at various times over the next several years. Watson was also a member of the American Physiological Society and in 1917 became a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (Woodworth 1959).

Watson published his second book, *Psychology from the Standpoint of a Behaviorist*, in 1919. This book, arguably his most important, played a critical role in changing attitudes toward behaviorism among Watson's contemporaries (Woodworth 1959). In it, Watson outlined his vision for the prospective field of behaviorism and included the techniques and essentials available for its creation (Skinner 1959). He also further explained his criticisms of "introspectionists," whom he asserts "produced a set of laboratory studies almost devoid of human interest" (Watson 1919, p. viii). He would go on to publish a second edition of *Psychology from the Standpoint of a Behaviorist* in 1924, which contained a yet stronger, more defined outline of his proposed program of behaviorism. Watson devoted approximately one-third of the book to relevant data for his proposed scientific field and filled the remainder of the book with material related to human anatomy and physiology (Skinner 1959).

Regardless of its critiques, *Psychology from the Standpoint of a Behaviorist* would have a dramatic effect within the field, attracting both adherents and dissidents (Skinner 1959). Watson's second book would also contain two chapters delineating his controversial views on hereditary behavior (Watson 1919).

Beginning in 1917, while still a professor at Johns Hopkins University, Watson conducted an experiment that would arguably become one of "psychology's greatest mysteries" (DeAngelis 2010, p. 10). Arvilla Merritte, a wet nurse who worked at the Johns Hopkins campus hospital at the time, was paid \$1 for allowing her son Douglas to be the subject of Watson's emotional conditioning experiment. Along with his graduate student assistant, Rosalie Rayner, Watson exposed the 9-month-old, alias "Albert B.," to furry objects, including a white rat. Initially, Douglas enjoyed playing with the objects. In the next stage of the study, Watson began making a loud sound behind Douglas' head as he was playing with the white rat. After several trials with the loud sound, Douglas showed signs of fear when confronted with the animals and other furry items with which he previously enjoyed playing (DeAngelis 2010). This study remains one of the most cited articles in psychology textbooks (Beck et al. 2009). There is no evidence that Watson ever attempted to decondition Douglas, who would die at the age of 6 of acquired hydrocephalus. However, there is no evidence to support or dispute the persistence of Douglas' fear of furry objects after he left Johns Hopkins (DeAngelis 2010).

Transition from Academia to Advertising

Unbeknownst to Watson, the Little Albert study would end up being the final published research of Watson's career in academia. His personal and professional lives collided in 1920, when he was asked to resign from Johns Hopkins following a sensationalized divorce from Mary Ickes. The marriage had collapsed when Ickes discovered Watson's affair with Rosalie Rayner, his graduate student. Watson married Rayner that same year,

and the two would remain married until her death in 1934 (Woodworth 1959).

Watson moved fluidly from academia into business, when in 1921 he became a staff member at the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency (Woodworth 1959). In addition to completing a rigorous training process, Watson became competent in advertisement and sales by clerking at Macy's, selling coffee, and participating in pharmacy investigations, before working through every department at the Thompson agency (Kreshel 1990). Watson soon took up the post of ambassador-at-large for Stanley Resor, the president of the agency. In this role, Watson attended conventions and conferences, where he spoke about the application of behaviorist psychology on advertising and sales (Kreshel 1990). Watson left the Thompson agency in 1936 and moved to the William Esty advertising firm, where he remained until his retirement in 1946–1947 (Kreshel 1990).

In 1928, Watson published *Psychological Care of Infant and Child*, a book he would later publicly regret (Skinner 1959). This treatise on childcare represented Watson's continued efforts to describe, predict, and finally manipulate human behavior (Houk 2000). Among other contentious assertions, *Psychological Care* would include cautions directed at parents to avoid unnecessary displays of affection, such as hugging and kissing children or letting them sit on your lap (Skinner 1959; Houk 2000). However, this book also included advice that was arguably groundbreaking for its time, including warnings against using corporal punishment and advocacy of an open-minded approach to sexual concerns. In fact, Watson even espoused the value of sexual education as a preventive measure for sexual transmitted diseases (Todd 2005).

By the mid-1930s, Watson's mark in the field was definitive, as behaviorism had become the dominant methodological and/or theoretical orientation within the field of psychology. On the other hand, Watson's brand of behaviorism was overshadowed by the newer focus on conditioning and learning as advocated by Skinner, Hull, and Guthrie (Todd 2005). After retiring from his job in advertisement in 1946, Watson moved to a

small estate in Woodbury, Connecticut (Woodworth 1959). His personal life would be marred by tragedy when one of his sons with Rosalie, William, died by suicide in 1954. Just a few years later, Watson died in 1958 at the age of 80 (Cohn 2014).

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