Edward Chase Tolman received his first degree, in engineering, from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. However, he later changed to psychology and was awarded the PhD degree by Harvard in 1915. He taught for a while at Northwestern University, but he spent most of his career (1918–1954) at the University of California at Berkeley, where he established his rat laboratory.

In his early years, he was much impressed with John Watson's new behaviorism. However, he departed from the typical S-R (stimulus-response) psychology and began to develop a different concept, which he called “purposive behaviorism.” Unlike the more traditional behaviorists, he placed great emphasis on cognition, emphasizing the importance of how individuals perceive the fields they are in.

Tolman is known primarily for his theory of learning. Many psychologists consider his theory a “cognitive field theory,” although in his many experiments, primarily with the white rat, he always stressed behavior. He considered the behavioral event to be molar rather than molecular, which means that the event should be identified and described as a whole rather than reduced to a series of reflexes. Furthermore, he considered behavior to be purposive, indicating the importance of goal direction; the direction an organism takes depends on its perception of the goal and the totality of the situation along with expectations developed with regard to the situation.

According to Tolman, learning consists of the organism’s moving along a path guided by various stimuli, both internal and external. One learns by signs, that is, what leads to what. What is learned is not a series of movements, but meanings. One learns a route to a goal and a “cognitive map” results that enables an organism to go from one point in the environment to another without depending on a set of bodily movements. Learning involves both expectancies and their confirmation. The importance of the goal is not to be thought of as a reward or reinforcement as in the learning theories of Thorndike, Hull, and Skinner, but merely as a confirmation of the expectancies.

Tolman is usually credited with introducing the concept of the “intervening variable” into psychology. Intervening variables involve inferred or unobservable factors that help in the explanation of the event but are not directly verifiable.

Finally, Tolman believed that learning could occur in the absence of a goal. He identified this as “latent learning.” Although not directly observable, learning could take place implicitly, and later, when a goal was introduced, the reality of the latent learning would become evident.

Suggested Readings
- Tolman, E. C. (1949). There is more than one kind of learning. Psychological Review, 56, 144-155.
APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA

https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/tolman_edward_1886_1959