Definition: Watson, John Broadus from Chambers Biographical Dictionary
1878-1958
US psychologist

He was born in Greenville, South Carolina. As professor at Johns Hopkins University (1908-20) he was a leading exponent of Behaviourism, holding that a scientific psychology could only study what was directly observable, i.e., behaviour. His most important work is Behavior - An Introduction to Comparative Psychology (1914). He later resigned from Johns Hopkins and became an advertising executive.

Summary Article: Watson, John B.
from The Social History of the American Family: An Encyclopedia

John Broadus Watson (1878–1958) was an American psychologist who both pioneered and popularized the scientific theory of behaviorism, in which psychology is restricted to the prediction and control of those aspects of human and animal behavior that are objectively observable. He left behind a turbulent and controversial life in academia to pursue a career in advertising. By directing public attention to the crucial role of the environment in shaping children’s behavior, Watson had a profound influence on social sciences and on American families.

Early Life and Education
Watson was born in 1878 to Emma (née Roe) and Pickens Butler Watson, a heavy-drinking, largely absent father. His mother took the family from an isolated farm to Greenville, South Carolina, which at the time was in the midst of a transformation from a farming town to a center for the cotton mill industry. There, Watson attended Furman University and completed some psychology courses without excelling in them. Although he had not yet distinguished himself academically, Watson had grown into an ambitious young man determined to escape poverty and improve his social standing.

Watson later enrolled in graduate school at the University of Chicago. He soon turned to experimental psychology and was influenced by Jacques Loeb, an animal physiologist who believed that all biological processes were fundamentally mechanistic in nature. For his dissertation, Watson investigated the learning processes of rats. In 1903, he earned his Ph.D. in psychology and joined the faculty of the University of Chicago as an instructor. In that same year, he married a young student named Mary Ickes.

Pioneering Behaviorism
Watson’s continued animal research in Chicago won the admiration of scientists across the country and a professorship at Johns Hopkins University, where he became department chair. These years also saw the deepening of his conviction that the job of psychology was not to investigate consciousness as revealed by introspection but to elucidate the functions of behaviors in humans and nonhuman animals by way of experiment. His writing reached both academic and lay audiences intrigued by the promise of applications from the new science of behavior.

In 1913, Watson delivered a lecture titled “Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It,” in which he argued that psychology was an empirical science that ought to be conducted using experiments with a view toward predicting and controlling human behavior. His academic reputation grew apace, winning him the...
presidency of the American Psychological Association (APA) in 1915. The private sector soon took note, and he accepted a position with an advertising firm in New York that hoped to apply the principles of behaviorism in the business world.

Challenging the prevailing psychiatric authorities, Watson hoped to view mental disorders from a behavioral perspective. While Freudians linked mental disturbances to unconscious processes, Watson theorized that maladaptive emotional reactions might stem from early learning experiences that might be reproduced in a laboratory setting.

**“Little Albert”**

Watson put his theory to the test with the infamous “Little Albert” experiment. In the first phase of this study, Watson, along with his graduate student assistant Rosalie Rayner, had a nine-month-old boy play with a white rat. The boy showed no initial fear of the rat. In the second, “conditioning,” phase, the rat was paired with a frightening, loud noise. This noise provoked a fearful response in Albert that he would later produce in the presence of the white rat with or without the noise. Watson judged that he had managed to instill in little Albert a rat phobia, lending support to his theory that phobias and other forms of psychopathology could be viewed as products of behavioral conditioning. Although Watson's conclusions have been criticized on methodological and ethical grounds, his experiment remains a powerful illustration of how principles of conditioning may be used to control human behavior.

The success of the “Little Albert” experiment was overshadowed in the academic world by Watson and Rayner’s romantic affair, which in 1920 led to Watson's forced resignation from Johns Hopkins and divorce from Ickes. The ensuing public scandal decisively ended Watson's academic career. In 1921, Watson moved with Rayner to New York to continue his work in advertising. He worked to persuade executives of the potential of conditioned emotional responses for controlling consumers’ behavior.

**Later Works**

Watson also continued to publish popular works, including *Behaviorism* in 1924 and *Psychological Care of the Infant and Child* in 1928. In the latter work, Watson argued that parents ought not to show affection to their children but to show approval sparingly for good behavior. This purportedly would overcome any limitations in the child's nature and produce well-adjusted, productive adults. For Watson, behaviorism settled the nature versus nurture debate, with nurturance as the clear winner.

Watson's family life was marked by strain and tragic loss. Rayner died suddenly of pneumonia in 1935. In 1954, his son William committed suicide. Though he was honored in 1957 by the APA for his lifetime contributions to psychology, he burned his scientific papers shortly before his death in 1958. Despite the turbulence of his personal and professional lives, Watson bestowed a legacy of bold scientific innovation, and gave U.S. families hope that the technology of behaviorism could give them the power to shape the future as they willed.

**See Also:** Advertising and Commercials, Families in; Child-Rearing Experts; Child-Rearing Manuals; Child-Rearing Practices; Functionalist Theory; Mental Disorders; Nature Versus Nurture Debate; Psychoanalytic Theories; Skinner, B. F.; Social History of American Families: 1851 to 1900; Social History of American Families: 1901 to 1920; Social History of American Families: 1921 to 1940; Social History of American Families: 1941 to 1960

**Further Readings**

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