

Evaluation of the behavioural perspective

The behavioural perspective sees maladaptive behaviour as the product of past and current learning experiences although it does recognise the contribution that genetics makes to behaviour. Maladaptive behaviour can be unlearned and adaptive behaviour learned. The person's past is considered in terms of their learning history but current events are considered to be more influential. Maladaptive behaviour is simply seen as the pattern symptoms, there are no underlying causes and there is no 'symptom substitution'. When the symptoms disappear, the problem disappears with them. In terms of effectiveness the behavioural approach has been scientifically evaluated and is relatively effective across a range of emotional and behavioural problems, e.g. anxiety, phobias and different kinds of disruptive classroom behaviour. It can be used in conjunction with biological treatments, e.g. with drug therapy in the case of ADHD.

However, the behavioural perspective does not address problems where cognitive or psychodynamic factors might be involved in or responsible for maladaptive behaviour. Cognitive and unconscious processes are ignored. It does not consider underlying causes that may be operating but simply focuses on observable symptoms. It emphasises changing people's behaviours through external methods rather than through the person's own resources. People are therefore seen as passive recipients rather than active agents. Furthermore, the scientific basis of conditioning appears inadequate in certain respects. The idea of biological 'preparedness' appears necessary to explain why certain stimuli become the subjects of phobias and not others, e.g. snakes. Therefore biological constraints can limit the effects of conditioning. Finally, it is said that awareness is not simply an effect of conditioning but can be a cause of a person's behaviour, e.g. a person can choose to be reinforced or not.

Behavioural assessment

The basis

Behavioural assessment is based on a scientific methodology on what is overt and observable. Behaviour is considered to be relatively quantifiable in terms of latency, frequency, duration and severity. This type of assessment is concerned with maintaining objectivity. This means avoiding high levels of inference, speculation, bias and prejudice about behaviours and causes of behaviour. Behavioural assessment excludes reference to cognitive or psychodynamic factors. It also subscribes to a dimensional rather than a categorical approach to behaviour, i.e. seeing behaviour as lying along a continuum rather than being describable in terms of categories or labels. Behaviour is defined in functional terms, i.e. the functions it serves rather than what it describes. It is also defined relative to a given context or situation. The aim of this form of assessment is to describe accurately the occurrence and sequence of overt and observable behaviours and the antecedents and consequences of those behaviours. Antecedents are the events immediately preceding given behaviours and consequences are events immediately following the behaviours. This takes the form of a functional or ABC analysis of behaviour, describing the pattern of antecedents and consequences.

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Main principles

- Behavioural assessment involves identifying overt, observable and specific behaviours, e.g. a student's speech acts and off-task behaviours that are perceived as problematic by teachers or parents.

- Both excesses and deficits in behaviour are identified along with their appropriateness or inappropriateness relative to the context, e.g. the student spends too much time or too little time in class discussions in English and too much or too little time in movement in PE.

- Emphasis is placed on current patterns of observable behaviour rather than looking for causes in the distant or remote past, e.g. the student's existing off-task behaviour. However it should be noted that past learning behaviour could have a bearing on current learning behaviour, for example, in terms of the student's reinforcement history. There is a focus on factors that serve to set off the behaviours, called triggers, and factors that serve to maintain the behaviours over time. For example, teachers shouting at a student becomes a trigger and other students' expressed amusement at the student's antics, becomes a maintaining factor.

- Behavioural functional analysis concentrates on the context of the student's problem behaviours, e.g. if it is in the classroom, in most subjects, in the afternoons, at the end of the day and with certain other pupils. It also looks at what teachers and pupils say and do before the student's problem behaviours and what the student, other students and the teacher do and say afterwards.

- Behavioural assessment avoids using pre-determined labels or categories. ✓ Preferring to see behaviour as lying along a continuum. Behaviour is described in terms of degrees of difference rather than kinds of difference. Labelling can stigmatise and it can also lead to concentration on the weaknesses rather than the strengths of a student.

- The main conclusion of an assessment should be the arrival at a formulation of the problem, i.e. a specific description of the problem behaviours, how they have developed, how they are being maintained and how they can be decreased or terminated. A formulation should lead to testable hypotheses resulting in long term objectives and short term targets. These targets are summed up in the acronym SMART, i.e.

S	PECIFIC
M	MEASURABLE
A	ACHIEVABLE
R	RELEVANT
T	TIME-LIMITED

The methods used in behavioural assessment

Behaviours are assessed specifically in terms of latency, frequency, duration and severity or intensity. The aim is to arrive at a representative sample of current problem behaviours over a number of weeks. This sampling is undertaken in order to establish behavioural pre-intervention baseline. This baseline is used as a benchmark or standard to allow comparison of behaviour in the future after an intervention has been

Direct observation

Functional or ABC analysis is based on direct observation. Through the use of the ABC teachers can keep a running record of students' problem behaviours and the antecedents and consequences of those problem behaviours.

The ABC records can be collated and summarised in order to arrive at conclusions as to the patterns of students' problem behaviours, e.g. days, times, subjects and activities. These summaries should contribute to formulations, i.e. hypotheses that should lead to interventions that might decrease or terminate the problem behaviours.

In observing students, teachers can use behaviour frequency and interval recording sheets. These sheets can be annotated if necessary with additional observations at the time of recording.

Issues relating to observation

Ideally because of the variability of behaviour, a representative sample of behaviour should be obtained over an extended period, say two or three weeks. However, students' problem behaviours may be known to occur on particular days, at certain times and in specific contexts thus allowing economical observation.

Observation can be undertaken through using frequency, interval, duration and latency methods to record problem behaviours.

Teachers should be aware of various problems that can occur with the process of observation. Quite frequently students become aware they are being observed and as a result the observer's presence changes the students' behaviour (known as *reactivity*). However, this is usually temporary and may be eliminated as the students become habituated or accustomed to the observer's presence.

Observers should agree on the specific definitions of behaviour and when observing students agree on what they are observing (known as *inter-rater reliability*). There needs to be periodic checking that observers agree over what is being observed to avoid what is known as *behavioural drift*, that is, observers drifting away from the agreed definitions of specific behaviours. Observers should also be aware of any biases or prejudices that may contaminate their observations.

Assessment instruments

Teachers can make use of the checklists and profiles that enable them to record specific information about students' problem behaviours in a structured, comprehensive and systematic way; see Ayers *et al.* (1996) for recording instruments.

Behavioural interviewing

The aims of behavioural interviews are to:

- contribute information for a specific and accurate description of the student's problem behaviours;
 - contribute information to achieve a formulation of the problem behaviours;
 - contribute to an overall behavioural assessment of the student.
- When interviewing the student the interviewer should:

- find out what events trigger and maintain the student's problem behaviours in both the home and school contexts;
- find out what rewards or punishments, if any, influence the student's behaviours.

When interviewing parents/careers the interviewer should:

- find out what they think triggers and maintains the student's problem behaviours in both the home and school contexts;
- find out what rewards or punishments, if any, influence the student's behaviours.

When interviewing teachers and other members of staff the interviewer should ascertain:

- what they think triggers and maintains the student's problem behaviours in both the home and school contexts;
- in particular the latency, frequency, duration and severity of the student's problem behaviours;
- the learning and behavioural strengths as well as the weaknesses of the student;
- the strategies and interventions used by teachers and the effectiveness of those interventions, particularly rewards and punishments.

The information provided by the student, parents and teachers should be collated and integrated into an overall behavioural assessment of the student.

The ABC Model of Analysis

This model provides a method of analysing behaviour:

A refers to the antecedent events, those observable events that immediately precede the student's problem behaviour;

B refers to the problem behaviour itself, i.e. what the student is actually doing in observable terms not what the teacher thinks or infers that the pupil is doing;

C refers to the consequences of the problem behaviour, those observable events that immediately follow on from the student's problem behaviour.

Besides the immediate or proximal events, it is also possible to identify remote or background antecedent events and consequences that contribute to the problem behaviour. These remote events and consequences are not observable in the immediate context but could be observed to influence the immediate situation (see Figure 2.2).

Date/time	Antecedents	Behaviour	Consequences
	Teacher shouts at student	Student shouts back	Other students laugh
	Asked to work on his own	Leaves seat	Sits on other student's seat
	Teacher leaves room	Student runs around the classroom	Other students run around as well

Figure 2.2 An example of ABC analysis

- A** Events occurring immediately prior to the student's problem behaviour may prompt that behaviour. The teacher needs to be aware of occurrences that trigger the pupil's problem behaviour and the consequences of the behaviour in terms of the student and other students. Antecedents are either immediate, e.g. the classroom situation, or background which include events at home. The main focus is on the immediate events. See Ayers *et al.* (1996) for greater detail and photocopyable forms.
 - B** Teachers should identify and define clearly and accurately the observable problem behaviours.
 - C** The immediate consequences for the student can be reinforcing or punishing. The teacher should be aware of aspects of classroom management and teaching that might be reinforcing the student appropriately or inappropriately. Other students might also be reinforcing the student's problem behaviour.
- Remote or background antecedents might be reinforcing problem behaviours in the school but this does not necessarily mean that those antecedents must be changed in order for behaviour to change to occur in school.
- It should be noted that the connections between antecedents, consequences and the problem behaviours are contingent or empirical, i.e. actually observed events.

Behavioural formulation

A behavioural formulation should be based on a behavioural assessment and consist of the following elements:

- a precise, clear and specific description of the problem behaviours;
- an hypothesis as to what events are triggering and maintaining the behaviours;
- an idea as to how these problems could be managed, i.e. an intervention that emerges from the formulation;
- an idea as to the likely outcome of the suggested intervention.

Example

John is a 10-year-old boy with reading difficulties, who is frequently out of his seat in the classroom (as measured through formal observation-fixed interval sampling). When presented with reading work by the teacher (an antecedent event), John leaves his seat and moves around the classroom talking to other pupils (problem behaviours) who laugh when he talks to them (consequence). Through leaving his seat John avoids reading; he continues to avoid reading (a formulation). John needs his reading skills improved through an appropriate reading programme along with paired reading, peer tutoring and mentoring (interventions focused on learning). He also needs a positive reinforcement programme that encourages him to stay in his seat and to be on task, e.g. a behaviour chart (such as shown in Figure 2.3) or personalised monitoring booklet (interventions focused on behaviour, such as shown in Figure 2.4).

If John's reading skills improve and he responds to the reinforcement programme this will hopefully increase his on task behaviour (likely outcome).