



John Broadus Watson and Behaviourism

Criticism and scandal

Kieron Sheehy

In the experiment what they did they used to freshen up the reaction so it wasn't a one off conditioning, which is the impression we gain from later works that Albert was conditioned once to the rat and this generalised across other objects and animals. They freshened up the rat conditioning by on different occasions repeating the conditioning with the metal bar. They also did the same with the rabbit. And it was written up and published in 1920. If you look in undergrad psychology books you will see that the animals that Albert was conditioned to vary. The items that he responded fearfully to also have changed so they've become white fur coats, white fur hats. The degree of generalisation's changed and the things he responded to has changed. There were several reasons why this has happened. The first one is that Watson himself changed the way he reported his experiment. So the experiment was published in 1920 and in 1928 he produced a book on bringing up children. If you read that book you see photos of Albert being conditioned and he in the book reports how he was conditioned with a rabbit first. Only once, you know with the metal bar technique, and then that then generalises to other animals including a dog, a rat and so forth. So Watson himself has misreported his initial experiment. It fits much more with the behavioural theory of the time of generalisation. It's much clearer but that's not actually the experiment. So subsequent people reporting on Watson's work go to what they believe to be an original source, Watson's own writings, but that in fact is a spin on his own experiment.

James T. Todd

One textbook author even said that Little Albert eventually became a psychologist.

Presenter

And presumably we don't know that at all?

James T. Todd

Well, I wrote the writer and he said that that story was injected by a copy editor at the last stage of production of the book because he wanted the story to have a good ending.

Presenter

With such a groundbreaking experiment and his fondness for self-publicity Watson was obviously a rising star in psychology. So it might come as something of a surprise to discover that Little Albert was to be his last experiment. In 1920 at the age of just forty-two his academic career was over. The reason? A scandal which rocked Baltimore.

James Stimpert

John Watson was married. His wife was part of a prominent Baltimore family. While he was here on the faculty he had a graduate student named Rosalie Rayner who was also one of another prominent Baltimore family. It gradually became known to his wife as well as to his colleagues that he was having an affair with Ms Rayner.

Presenter

So we've got some headlines here. We've got 'Dr J. B. Watson sued for absolute divorce', 'Affectionate letters said to have been obtained by wife through ruse from young woman's boudoir', 'Allegations surprise'. That's quite good. 'Comment refused by Rayner family', 'Mrs Watson reveals name of Rosalie.'

It's interesting that this has become the scandal, whereas his possibly dubious ethics over experiments with babies doesn't make the...

James Stimpert

Again, standards were different at that time. When this all became public President Goodnow called Watson into his office and essentially laid the facts out for him and said we cannot continue your appointment on the Faculty. And Watson apparently made no objection. He picked up a piece of stationery from the President's desk, you can see the letterhead is the President's Office, and he addressed a short memo to President Frank J. Goodnow stating:

'My dear Dr Goodnow, I hereby tender my resignation as Professor of Psychology in The Johns Hopkins University to take immediate effect.'