## PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPLANATIONS OF PHOBIC DISORDERS

To read up on the psychological explanations of phobic disorders, refer to pages 485–496 of Eysenck’s A2 Level Psychology.

### Ask yourself

* How would the psychodynamic approach explain phobias?
* How would the behavioural approach explain phobias?
* How would the cognitive approach explain phobias?

### What you need to know

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| [**BEHAVIOURAL EXPLANATIONS**](http://www.a-levelpsychology.net/mod/page/view.php?id=474#behavoiural) | [**PSYCHODYNAMIC EXPLANATION**](http://www.a-levelpsychology.net/mod/page/view.php?id=474#psychodynamic) | [**COGNITIVE EXPLANATIONS**](http://www.a-levelpsychology.net/mod/page/view.php?id=474#cognitive) | [**SOCIAL EXPLANATIONS**](http://www.a-levelpsychology.net/mod/page/view.php?id=474#social) |
| * Classical and operant conditioning * Modelling or observational learning * Research evidence and evaluation | * Freud’s psychodynamic theory * Research evidence and evaluation | * Interpretive biases | * Parenting styles * Life events and experiences |

#### BEHAVIOURAL EXPLANATIONS

The behavioural approach uses the principles of classical conditioning (learned associations) and operant conditioning (learned consequences) to explain the development of phobias. Bandura (1986, see A2 Level Psychology page 487) expanded on the traditional learning theories with modelling, or observational learning, which offers another explanation of phobia development.

###### RESEARCH EVIDENCE FOR BEHAVIOURAL EXPLANATIONS

* The conditioning of a phobia in Albert (an 11-month-old boy) by Watson and Rayner (1920, see A2 Level Psychology pages 485–486) used the principles of classical conditioning. They induced fear of a rat (neutral stimulus) by repeated pair associations of it with a loud noise (unconditioned stimulus). Albert automatically feared the loud noise (unconditioned response) and quickly learned to fear (conditioned response) the rat (conditioned stimulus). This showed that a phobia could develop through association of a previously neutral stimulus with a fear-provoking stimulus.
* As predicted by the behavioural principle of generalisation, the phobia can then be generalised to similar objects. For example, Albert generalised his fear to other furry white objects including cotton wool and Santa Claus’ beard.
* Mowrer’s (1947, see A2 Level Psychology page 486) two-process theory expanded upon the traditional explanation as, according to this, the phobia is acquired through classical conditioning and maintained by operant conditioning, as avoidance of the feared object is negatively reinforcing and so stamps in the phobia.
* 50% of people being treated by Barlow and Durand (1995, see A2 Level Psychology page 486) for driving phobia recalled a traumatic incident that triggered the phobia, so supporting classical conditioning. Similarly, nearly everybody they were treating for choking phobia linked this to an experience of choking.  
  Hackmann, Clark, and McManus (2000, see A2 Level Psychology page 486) found that 96% of social phobics remembered some socially traumatic experience that had happened to them (often in adolescence). For example, they were harshly criticised in public or couldn’t stop blushing on an important social occasion.
* Bandura (1986, see A2 Level Psychology page 487) proposed that phobias could also be developed through observational learning, modelling, and direct reinforcement.

Evidence of modelling was found in monkeys that developed snake phobia by observing another monkey’s fearful reaction to a snake (Mineka et al., 1984, see A2 Level Psychology page 487). Also, Merckelbach et al. (1996, see A2 Level Psychology page 487) reported evidence that modelling and negative information transmission are important in producing small-animal phobias and blood-injection-injury phobia.

###### RESEARCH EVIDENCE AGAINST BEHAVIOURAL EXPLANATIONS

* According to the principles of classical conditioning, the association is extinguished if the bonds cease. Thus, the phobia should not persist over time, although Mowrer’s (1947, see A2 Level Psychology page 486) expanded explanation can account for this.
* Phobias of neutral stimuli cannot be as easily conditioned as the Albert experiment suggests. Attempts to condition phobias of neutral stimuli using electric shocks in the laboratory have had little success (Valentine, 1946, see A2 Level Psychology page 488).
* Approximately half of all phobics cannot recall a highly unpleasant experience with the feared object (Keuthen, 1980, see A2 Level Psychology page 487).
* DiNardo et al. (1988, see A2 Level Psychology page 487) reported that 50% of dog phobics had an unpleasant encounter but about 50% of normal controls had also had such experiences and did not develop a phobia. Behaviourism ignores cognitive factors and so cannot account for individual variation. The fact that not all phobics have had a bad experience and some non-phobics have had a bad experience and not developed phobia is probably due to the patients’ perception and interpretation, and so cognitive rather than behavioural factors are important.
* There are only a few well-documented cases where social learning had clearly led to phobia.

###### EVALUATION OF BEHAVIOURAL EXPLANATIONS

* **Ethical issues.** Protection of participants was clearly an ethical issue in the Albert study, which the researchers acknowledged but felt was justifiable because children experience fearful situations in daily life. However, whether the ends justify the means is debatable, particularly given that the validity of the study can be questioned.
* **Face validity.** Learning from experience and social learning theory do make sense and the latter is particularly convincing as children do imitate their parents’ responses and parents do reinforce fear responses, e.g. of traffic.
* **Reliability.** The research evidence on whether phobias result from a traumatic experience, and so classical conditioning, is very inconsistent and so lacks reliability. Also, attempts to replicate Watson and Rayner’s research have been unsuccessful. This casts doubt on the validity of the explanation and shows that not all phobias can be explained by conditioning. Perhaps their findings are due to the fact that Little Albert was an 11-month-old child and easier to condition as he would be less influenced by cognitive factors (ignored by the theory) than adult participants.
* **Retrospective.** The fact that bad experiences of the phobic object are not remembered could be due to poor recall as retrospective data is subject to error. Or the memory could have been repressed if it was particularly traumatic. This supports the validity of conditioning as an explanation, as it may be that frightening experiences have initiated the phobia but that these have not been remembered.
* **Reductionism.** Behavioural explanations are oversimplified because they only account for learning and ignore other important factors such as cognition and biological preparedness.
* **Environmental determinism.** The behavioural explanations are deterministic because they suggest that behaviour is controlled by the environment, which ignores the individual’s ability to control their own behaviour.
* **Nature vs. nurture.** Behavioural explanations account for nurture only as, according to these, behaviour is solely a product of learning as we are born as a blank slate (tabula rasa). They ignore nature, which is a significant weakness as the evolutionary explanation suggests certain objects are more likely to be conditioned than others.
* **Multi-dimensional approach.** As not all phobias can be explained by conditioning and social learning, other processes must be involved, such as biological preparedness as suggested by the evolutionary approach. So to understand phobias an interaction of different factors must be considered.

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#### PSYCHODYNAMIC EXPLANATION

Freud proposed that anxiety results when id impulses or sexual (libidinous) desires are repressed into the unconscious. Repressing and therefore denying wish-fulfilment of whatever it is we know we shouldn’t do creates tension that is expressed as anxiety. Phobias develop as a consequence of conflict and fixation at one of the psychosexual stages of development. Psychic energy becomes attached to a specific object as a way of coping with the conflict and so the object then comes to symbolise the conflict. For example, fixation at the phallic stage may result in a fear of spiders because the spider may represent a fear of the sexual organs (Abraham, 1927, see A2 Level Psychology page 488).

###### RESEARCH EVIDENCE FOR THE PSYCHODYNAMIC EXPLANATION

* Freud, as evidence for his theory, offered the case study of Little Hans’ phobia of horses (see A2 Level Psychology pages 488–490). According to Freud, Hans feared horses because they resembled his father; their black muzzles and blinkers looked like his father’s moustache and glasses. He feared his father because of castration anxiety as a result of his Oedipal conflict and displaced this onto horses.

###### RESEARCH EVIDENCE AGAINST THE PSYCHODYNAMIC EXPLANATION

* Behavioural explanations can provide a simpler and more convincing account of the phobia. Hans himself explained his phobia developed after he witnessed a serious accident involving a horse and cart moving at high speed. His phobia only occurred when horses were pulling carts, not to horses in general, which should be the case if Freud’s explanation was correct and so it seems more likely his fear was a conditioned response.

###### EVALUATION OF THE PSYCHODYNAMIC EXPLANATION

* **Face validity.** It makes sense that we feel anxious when we give in to unacceptable desires, and phobics often have no knowledge of how their phobia developed, which may be because unconscious processes are involved.
* **Lack of research evidence.** Research evidence is limited and the Little Hans case study has serious methodological weaknesses as the following points demonstrate. There is no objective empirical support for Freud’s explanation and so validity is limited.
* **Researcher bias.** Freud only met Little Hans twice and so most of his information came from the boy’s father who was an ardent supporter of Freud’s work. This brings into question the validity of the research, as researcher expectancy and bias in interpretations mean that the truth of the research is questionable.
* **Generalisability.** Case studies have limited generalisability and so population validity is questionable, which means the findings may not be representative of other populations.

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#### COGNITIVE EXPLANATIONS

The cognitive approach suggests that cognitive biases underpin phobias. Phobics employ interpretive biases, which means they are more likely to perceive ambiguous stimuli as threatening and harmful to themselves than others would. This has face validity as it does account for the high level of anxiety reported by phobics and it makes sense that people with anxiety disorder find the world a threatening place.

###### RESEARCH EVIDENCE FOR COGNITIVE EXPLANATIONS

* Empirical support is provided by Thorpe and Salkovskis (1995, see A2 Level Psychology page 490) who found spider phobics had a number of interpretive biases compared to non-spider phobics when asked to imagine a spider was in the room with them.
* Kamieniecki, Wade, and Tsourtos (1997, see A2 Level Psychology page 491) presented participants with ambiguous scenarios relating to bodily sensations. Patients who had panic disorder with agoraphobia produced more anxiety-related interpretations of these scenarios, which is consistent with the typical clinical finding that patients mistakenly believe that a panic attack means they may well have a heart attack and die.
* Rapee and Lim (1992, see A2 Level Psychology page 492) provide evidence for similar interpretive biases in social phobics. They asked social phobics to give a public talk and then asked observers and the participants themselves to rate their public-speaking performance. Social phobics rated their performance as much worse than did the observers.

###### EVALUATION OF COGNITIVE EXPLANATIONS

* **Phobics do have cognitive biases.** This makes the explanation highly plausible.
* **Descriptive rather than explanatory**. However, a key weakness is that the cognitive explanation is descriptive rather than explanatory. It describes the thought patterns experienced rather than explaining how or why they developed in the first place.
* **Cause and effect.** Hackmann et al. (2000, see A2 Level Psychology page 492) found that 96% of social phobics recalled a socially traumatic event that may have helped to trigger the social phobia, which supports a behavioural origin to the phobia. But of course behaviourism doesn’t account for cognition so the two explanations combined into a cognitive-behavioural account would provide a better understanding of phobias. Furthermore, it is not clear whether the cognitive biases precede or follow the disorder, so cause and effect is an issue.

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#### SOCIAL EXPLANATIONS

Social factors that might be involved in the development of phobia include parental rearing styles and life events and experiences. Parental rearing styles high in control and overprotection and low in affection have been linked to social phobia and agoraphobia.

###### EVALUATION OF SOCIAL EXPLANATIONS

* **Retrospective and correlational.** Accounts of parental styles are retrospective and so may lack validity, and research is correlational so this cannot be inferred as a cause of phobias.
* **Evidence for life events.** A high number of life events have been reported in the months preceding an anxiety disorder. Kleiner and Marshall (1987, see A2 Level Psychology page 494) report that 84% of agoraphobics suffered family problems in the months prior to onset. Agorophobia tends to be preceded by life events involving physical harm that are unpredictable and uncontrollable; social phobia is known to be preceded by experience of sexual assault and verbal aggression between parents.
* **Cause and effect.** Research on life events is correlational and so cause and effect cannot be inferred. We do not know if the life event triggered the phobia or if the phobia led to the life event. For example, social phobia may be caused by negative social interactions or somebody in the early stages of developing phobia may have more negative interactions as a result. It is based on retrospective self-report, and so internal validity may be reduced due to bias and distorted recall.

### So what does this mean?

Now that we have covered psychological factors, it is no doubt clear there are numerous possible contributing factors to phobias, which of course makes it all the more difficult to explain the disorder. Given the different types of phobia, a multi-dimensional approach, such as the diathesis–stress model, must be taken in order to account for the influence of nature (genetic predisposition, personality) and nurture (conditioning, social learning, and stress). For example, temperament is partly genetically predisposed and this may influence biochemistry, social learning, and cognitive biases. Further research is needed to understand how the various biological and psychological factors interact.

The diathesis–stress model offers a more comprehensive account because it considers the interaction of nature and nurture. This better accounts for individual differences, particularly in those who share genes in common, such as identical twins where one develops phobia and the other doesn’t. The diathesis–stress model can explain this because, whilst both twins will have inherited the genetic component, they may experience different learning or stressful life events.

### Over to you

**1.** Outline and evaluate one or more psychological explanation(s) of one anxiety disorder. **(25 marks)**