

Academic Writing Guide

Tutor Feedback on a Draft of the Sample Essay – Stage 3, Part 2

Essay title: Critically consider psychological explanations for the acquisition of phobias. Justify your answer with reference to theoretical and empirical evidence from relevant literature.

According to Muris & Mercklback (2012), fears of particular objects or situations are common among the general population and are usually harmless. Phobias, however, go beyond common fears, and are classified as a mental disorder in the DSM-V (APA, 2013). They are characterised by excessive fear responses in the absence of any real danger, can lead to avoidance behaviours, and interfere with an individual's normal routine (Coelho & Purkis, 2009; Muris & Mercklback, 2012; APA, 2013). In fact, the NHS has reported that phobias are the most common type of anxiety disorder and can affect any individual irrespective of age, gender and social background (NHS Choices, 2017). Although the characteristics of phobias have been well established and defined, there are various theoretical perspectives in the literature regarding their acquisition, as it is not entirely clear why phobias develop in certain individuals and not others. This essay will critically consider the key psychological explanations, focusing on behaviourist and biological perspectives, highlighting that there is not one definitive explanation for the acquisition of phobias.

One of the key psychological explanations of phobias is that of the behaviourist approach. This approach suggests that phobias are acquired through associating an object or situation with a negative response through classical or operant conditioning, meaning that the phobic response is a learned behaviour. One example of this is the classical conditioning study conducted by Watson & Rayner (1920) known as the 'Little Albert' experiment, the purpose of this study was to attempt to condition a fear response in an 11 month old child through exposure to a particular stimulus, which in this case was a white rat. Watson & Rayner (1920) presented the rat to the child while at the same time sounding a loud, frightening noise by hitting a metal bar. As the

Commented [DM1]: Introduction is well structured and develops from general background to specifically dealing with essay title. Clear essay plan here. Well done.

Commented [DM2]: Clear topic sentence.

Commented [DM3]: This is an example of a 'comma splice'. You have combined two sentences with a comma but you should have used a full stop. You need to work on your punctuation as this is distracting for the reader. Have a look at the exercises here: http://www.bristol.ac.uk/arts/exercises/grammar/grammar_tutorial/page_47.htm

experiment developed, exposure to the rat by itself would induce 'Albert' to cry, even without the disturbing noise. The infant then demonstrated a fear response to other white objects, aside from the rat, such as cotton wool meaning the fear response became 'generalised'. It is therefore apparent that the phobia in this case developed from negative experiences, which supports the behaviourist explanation for the acquisition of phobias. However, not every individual with a phobia can identify such a negative experience or trigger for their phobia. In addition, this study focuses on only one individual, and therefore the findings cannot be applied to the general population. As well as this, the fact that the results were achieved within a laboratory setting also means they may not be applicable to a real life scenario. Furthermore, questions arise with regards to the ethical considerations of this study, the results of which could not be replicated today due to changes in the awareness of the right of the participants.

Commented [DM4]: This section is too descriptive-make this more concise.

Commented [DM5]: Good idea, but you need to support this idea with evidence from a source.

Commented [DM6]: Good – evidence of critical consideration, which would be strengthened by sources and citations.

Commented [DM7]: The ethical issue is not really relevant in a discussion of whether or not conditioning is a viable explanation for phobia acquisition—off topic.

The Critical Learning Experience perspective argues that a key incident is needed as a trigger to acquiring a phobia. One example of this within a real life setting, as opposed to a laboratory, is the case of a group of children who developed a phobic response following a severe lightning strike (M.J. Dollinger, 1984). This incident resulted in the children displaying anxiety and fear responses when exposed to other instances of lightning and thunder, which later developed into a generalised fear response to other types of extreme weather. It can be argued that when a phobia is generalised, then a greater level of fear can develop over time, and the phobia may become more exacerbated. Both the Dollinger (1984) example and the Little Albert experiment (Watson & Rayner, 1920) therefore show that phobic responses can be triggered by an initial negative experience.

Commented [DM8]: Lack of coherence—you need to use transition language to show how you have moved from one paragraph to another by linking ideas together. E.g. Another perspective related to the behaviourist approach is....

Commented [DM9]: Review citations – initials not needed.

Commented [DM10]: You could have drawn comparisons to the Little Albert experiment here in terms of 'generalisation'.

Commented [DM11]: You need to back up this claim with evidence (theoretical or empirical) from an appropriate source rather than just your own speculation. Needs more detail and support to incorporate critical thinking.

As I have outlined in this essay so far, a number of studies have been used to support the behaviourist perspective that phobias arise from a critical incident. Another related explanation could be from modelling the behaviour of others. One study that highlights both critical learning incidents and modelling is that by Merkelbach, Muris & Schouten (1996). This study details interviews with 22 children between 9-14 years old (and their

Commented [DM12]: This is not necessary and too informal. Avoid using 'I' in academic writing as it makes the style too conversational and interrupts the academic tone of your writing.

parents) on the onset and intensity of their spider phobias. The findings strongly suggest that a critical learning experience is required for the development of spider phobias in children. This could be in the form of a negative experience with spiders, or in the form of 'modelling' a fear response of another individual (i.e. if a parent shows a fear response to spiders, the child could learn this fear response). However, such findings cannot be generalised given the relatively small sample size and possibility of inaccuracy in asking participants to recall past events (Cohelo & Clarke, 1993). Furthermore, there is evidence to support the perspective that a critical learning experience is not always necessary for the onset of a phobia. DiNardo et al. (1988), for example, found that while 50% of individuals with a dog phobia had had a prior negative experience with a dog, the other 50% had not.

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Commented [DM14]: Therefore....? You need to sum up the key point here with another sentence to emphasise the importance of this point to the reader.

Although there is evidence to support the behaviourist perspective on the acquisition of phobias, there is also counter-evidence against this. One example is the fact that some individuals have phobias of objects or situations which they have not actually encountered. This means there may be a biological or genetic explanation to the onset of phobias. Öhman (2000) proposes that an underlying, genetic predisposition for phobias is evident in that it is easier to condition the fear of certain stimuli, such as snakes, in comparison to others. This biological perspective is supported by Mineka & Cook (1986, cited in Cohelo & Purkis, 2009, p. 336) who found that rhesus monkeys learned fear responses from watching videos of monkeys displaying fear reactions to items such as snakes, but did not learn fear responses to non-threatening stimuli (e.g. flowers). Therefore, such evidence suggests that phobias may originate from innate fears linked to evolutionarily relevant dangers rather than learned behaviours.

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In relation to the biological perspective, Arntz, Rauner, & van den Hout (1995) found a significant difference in the perceived danger ratings of 'anxious' individuals vs a control group. On the basis of this study, they have proposed that there may be an individual 'trait' or genetic characteristic to predispose people to develop anxiety disorders such as phobias. This genetic predisposition may also be connected to the

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area of the brain that deals with fear responses, which is called the 'amygdala'.

According to Bechara, Tranel, Damasio, Adolphs, Rockland, and Damasio (1995 cited in Cohelo & Purkis, 2009) studies have shown that amygdala damage produces deficits in fear conditioning in humans, which emphasises the importance of biological functioning rather than just the impact of critical incidents or learned behaviour. However, despite this there are also criticisms of the biological perspective for the acquisition of phobias. For example, Coelho & Purkis (2009, p. 338) point out that some evolutionarily dangerous stimuli, such as poisonous mushrooms, are not associated with fear responses. Another key point is that the role of individual experience and individual differences in phobic experiences cannot be simply generalised to biology.

Commented [DM20]: Good—but for APA you don't need to list all six authors by name (use the name of the first author followed by: et al.)

Commented [DM21]: Ok, but a bit simplistic. Expand on this more

This essay has critically considered psychological explanations for the acquisition of phobias. There is evidence to support the ideas behind the behaviourist approach, such as the impact of a critical negative experience, how behaviour can be modelled, and how phobias can be generalised to other related stimuli. In terms of the biological perspective, it can be seen that certain stimuli are more likely to produce a phobic response than others, perhaps due to being perceived as evolutionarily dangerous, and that some individuals are more susceptible to phobias than others. However, it is important to note that neither of these perspectives offers a full explanation for the acquisition of phobias. It can therefore be concluded that the development of phobias is likely to stem from a variety of factors rather than by a single element.

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Reference List

Watson, J. & Rayner, R. (1920) Conditioned emotional reactions. *Journal of experimental psychology*, 3(1), pp. 1-14

Coelho, C.M., & Purkis, H. (2009). The origins of specific phobias: Influential theories and current perspectives. *Review of General Psychology*, 13, 335-348.

Merkelbach, H., Muris, P., & Schouten, E. (1996). Pathways to fear in spider phobic children. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 34, 935-938.

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Arntz, A., Rauner, M., & van den Hout, M. (1995). "If I feel anxious, there must be danger": Ex-consequencia reasoning in inferring danger in anxiety disorders. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 33, 917-925.

NHS Choices (2016) Phobias. Retrieved from
<http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/phobias/pages/introduction.aspx>

Muris, P. & Merckelbach, H. (2012) 'Specific Phobia: Phenomenology, Epidemiology, and Etiology' in E.T. Davis, T.H. Ollendick & L.G. Öst (Eds.) *Intensive One-Session Treatment of Specific Phobias*. (pp. 3-18). New York: Springer-Verlag.

Dollinger, S.J. (1984). Lightning-strike disaster: Effects on children's fears and worries. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 52(6), 1028-38