

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

Introduction (150 words)

Opening sentence to attract the readers attention: Phobias are the most common type of anxiety disorder and can affect any individual irrespective of age, gender and social background (NHS Choices, 2017).

Background: Phobias 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, and interfere with an individual’s normal routine (Coelho & Purkis, 2009; Muris & Mercklback, 2012; APA, 2013).

Thesis Statement: Although the characteristics of phobias have been well established and defined, there are various theoretical perspectives in the literature as to how phobias are acquired. 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.

Outline the structure: This essay will deal with the following areas:

- Behaviourist explanations of phobias e.g. classical conditioning & modelling
- Biological explanations of phobias e.g. evolutionary predispositions
- Critical perspectives on these explanations

Main body (1,200 words): build points, develop ideas, support the main claim

Section 1: Behaviourist explanations 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, meaning that the phobic response is a learned behaviour.

Classical Conditioning (200 words)

Watson & Rayner (1920): Little Albert experiment.

- Infant: white rat + loud, frightening noise.
- Led to conditioned fear response to white rats, even when no sound was made.
- Fear response → generalised to other white objects e.g. cotton wool.

Critical Learning Experience & Generalisation (200 words)

The Critical Learning Experience perspective argues that a key incident is needed as a trigger to acquiring a phobia.

Dollinger (1984): Fear in children following a lightning strike

- Anxiety and fear responses associated with lightning and thunder
- Led to generalisation: Fear of other weather types (generalisation also shown in Little Albert)

Modelling: (200 words)

Merkelbach, Muris & Schouten (1996): Spider phobia interviews

- 22 children between 9-14 years old (and their parents) on the onset and intensity of their spider phobias.
- critical learning experience needed for the development of spider phobias in children.
- a negative experience with spiders / '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).

Mineka & Cook (1986, cited in Cohelo & Purkis, 2009, p. 336): Rhesus Monkey Experiments

- Rhesus monkeys learned fear responses from watching videos of monkeys displaying fear reactions to relevant stimuli (e.g. snakes) → 'Vicarious conditioning'

Criticism of behaviourist explanation of phobias: (200 words)

Criticism of methodology

e.g. spider phobia interviews.

- Asking participants to recall events may be inaccurate (Coelho & Purkis, 2009, p. 338)
- Criticism of animal models being applied to humans & real life, rather than laboratory scenarios (Cohelo & Purkis, 2009, p.337)
- Other researchers have failed to reproduce the results of the Little Albert experiment (Cohelo & Purkis, 2009, p. 337)
- Phobias can arise without a critical learning experience e.g. DiNardo, Guzy & Bak (1988) found 50% of individuals with dog phobia had no negative experience with a dog.

Section 2: Biological Explanations of phobias (Counter-argument to behaviourist perspective) (200 words)

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): underlying predisposition for our phobias which makes it easier to condition fear of certain stimuli (e.g. snakes) more than others (e.g. rabbits).

Mineka & Cook (1986, cited in Cohelo & Purkis, 2009, p. 336): Rhesus Monkey Experiments

- Rhesus monkeys learned fear responses from watching videos of monkeys displaying fear reactions to relevant stimuli (e.g. snakes) → ‘Vicarious conditioning’; However, monkeys did not learn fear responses to non-threatening stimuli (e.g. flowers).

Arntz, Rauner, & van den Hout (1995):

- Perceived danger ratings of ‘anxious’ individuals vs a control group- significant difference.

- May be an individual ‘trait’ or characteristic (genetic) to predispose people to develop anxiety disorders.

- Brain function- Role of amygdala in fear responses. Amygdala damage produces deficits in fear conditioning in humans (Bechara et al., 1995 cited in Coelho & Purkis, 2009) → importance of biological functioning.

Criticism/counter-argument (200 words):

Some evolutionarily dangerous stimuli (e.g. poisonous mushrooms) are not associated with fear responses (Coelho & Purkis, 2009, p. 338).

The role of individual experience and individual differences → phobic experiences cannot be generalised to biology.

Conclusion (150 words): Re-emphasise the main claim

Refer to essay title & thesis statement: This essay has critically considered psychological explanations for the acquisition of phobias, focusing on the behaviourist and biological perspectives.

Summarise & evaluate main ideas: There is evidence both for the behaviourist and the biological perspectives (add examples). 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.

Limitations/ Possibilities for future (if needed):

Reference List:

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.

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DiNardo, P.A., Guzy, L.T. & Bak, R.M. (1988) Anxiety response patterns and etiological factors in dog-fearful and non-fearful subjects. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 26(3), 245-251

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

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NHS Choices (2016) Phobias. Retrieved from:

<http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/phobias/pages/introduction.aspx>

Öhman, A.L. (2000). Fear and anxiety: animal models and human cognitive psychophysiology. *Journal of affective disorders, 61*(3), 137-159.

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