Person of the Issue: John B. Watson (1878-1958)

Ankit Patel

January 9, 1878

Born
Travelers Rest, South Carolina

Died
September 25, 1958 (aged 80)
New York City, New York

Nationality
American

Doctoral advisor
J. R. Angell

Education
University of Chicago

John B. Watson grew up in South Carolina. While he later described himself as a poor student, he entered Furman University at the age of 16. After graduating five years later with a master's degree, he began studying psychology at the University of Chicago. Watson earned his Ph.D. in psychology in 1903.

Watson began teaching psychology at John Hopkins University in 1908. In 1913, he gave a seminal lecture at Columbia University titled Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It, which essentially detailed the behaviorist position.

According to John Watson, psychology should be the science of observable behavior. "Psychology as the behaviorist views it is a purely objective experimental branch of natural science. Its theoretical goal is the prediction and control of behavior. Introspection forms no essential part of its methods, nor is the scientific value of its data dependent upon the readiness with which they lend themselves to interpretation in terms of consciousness," he explained (1913).

1 Clinical Psychology, Sardar Parel University, Gujarat

1 Classics in the History of Psychology": "Watson obtained his Ph.D. under the supervision of Angell 1903.
Watson remained at John Hopkins University until 1920. He had an affair with Rayner, divorced his first wife and was then asked by the university to resign his position. Watson later married Rayner and the two remained together until her death in 1935. After leaving his academic position, Watson began working for an advertising agency where he remained until he retired in 1945.

During the later part of his life, John Watson's already poor relationships with his children grew progressively worse. He spent his last years living a reclusive life on a farm in Connecticut. Shortly before his death, he burned many of his unpublished personal papers and letters.

**Contributions to Psychology**

Watson set the stage for behaviorism, which soon rose to dominate psychology. While behaviorism began to lose its hold after 1950, many of the concepts and principles are still widely used today. Conditioning and behavior modification are still widely used in therapy and behavioral training to help clients change problematic behaviors and develop new skills.

Watson earned his Ph. D. from the University of Chicago in 1903. In his dissertation, "Animal Education: An Experimental Study on the Psychical Development of the White Rat, Correlated with the Growth of its Nervous System" he described the relationship between brain myelinization and learning ability in rats at different ages. Watson showed that the degree of myelination was largely related to wand learning. He discovered that the kinesthetic sense controlled the behavior of rats running in mazes. In 1908, Watson was offered and accepted a faculty position at Johns Hopkins University and was immediately promoted to chair of the psychology department.

**"Little Albert" experiment (1920)**

In his most famous and controversial experiment, known today as the "Little Albert" experiment, John Watson and a graduate assistant named Rosalie Rayner conditioned a small child to fear a white rat. They accomplished this by repeatedly pairing the white rat with a loud, frightening clanging noise. They were also able to demonstrate that this fear could be generalized to other white, furry objects. The ethics of the experiment are often criticized today, especially because the child's fear was never deconditioned.
In 2009, researchers were able to identify Little Albert as a boy named Douglas Merritte. The question of what happened to the child had intrigued many for decades. Sadly, the researchers found that the child died at age six of hydrocephalus, a medical condition in which fluid builds up inside the skull.

In 2012, researchers presented evidence that Merritte suffered from neurological impairments at time of the Little Albert experiment and that Watson may have knowingly misrepresented the boy as a "healthy" and "normal" infant.

**Timeline**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Happenings</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9 Jan 1878</td>
<td>John B. Watson was born in Greenville, South Carolina.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 Jan 1891</td>
<td>Watson's father left the family.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 Jan 1894</td>
<td>Got acceptance from Furman University.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 Jan 1899</td>
<td>Graduated from Furman University.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jan 1 1900</td>
<td>Began studying at Chicago University.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jan 1 1901</td>
<td>Watson majored in psychology and minored in philosophy and neurology at the University of Chicago.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jan 2 1901</td>
<td>He married Mary Ikes.</td>
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<td>Jan 1 1903</td>
<td>Graduated from Chicago University with a PhD in experimental psychology.</td>
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<td>Jan 1 1905</td>
<td>Dr. Watson's first child, Mary, was born.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jan 1 1905</td>
<td>Enrolled at John Hopkins University.</td>
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<td>Jan 1 1906</td>
<td>Watson was hired as an instructor at the University of Chicago.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jan 1 1907</td>
<td>Watson was hired as an associate professor of psychology at John Hopkins University. (It was here that he became known as the Founder of Behaviorism.)</td>
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<td>Jan 1 1914</td>
<td>He published Behavior: An Introduction to Comparative Psychology.</td>
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<td>Jan 1 1914</td>
<td>Watson became the President of the American Psychological Association.</td>
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<td>Jan 1 1916</td>
<td>Dr. Watson began his study on mental illnesses.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jan 1 1919</td>
<td>Watson published Psychology From the Standpoint of a Behaviorists.</td>
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Jan 1 1920    Watson was dismissed from John Hopkins University
Jan 1 1920    He published the "Little Albert" Experiment.
Jan 1 1921    Moved to New York.
Jan 1 1924    Watson became Vice President of J Walter Thompson Agency.

He published Behaviorism.
Jan 1 1928    Watson published the Psychological Care of Infant and Child.
Jan 1 1945    He retired as Vice President of William Esty Agency.
Jan 1 1957    John Watson was awarded the gold medal from the American

Psychological Association for his contributions to the field of psychology.
Sep 25 1958   Watson died in New York City.

"Give me a dozen healthy infants, well-formed, and my own specified world to bring them up in and I'll guarantee to take any one at random and train him to become any type of specialist I might select--doctor, lawyer, artist, merchant-chief, and, yes, even beggarman and thief, regardless of his talents, penchants, tendencies, abilities, vocations, and race of his ancestors. I am going beyond my facts and I admit it, but so have the advocates of the contrary and they have been doing it for many thousands of years."

–John B. Watson, Behaviorism, 1930

Achievements and Awards

- 1915 – Served as the President of the American Psychological Association (APA)
- 1919 – Published Psychology From the Standpoint of a Behaviorist
- 1925 – Published Behaviorism
- 1928 – Published Psychological Care of Infant and Child
- 1957 – Received the APA's award for contributions to psychology
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Reference


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