

Behaviourism

Core Idea: Human behaviour is learned and can be reshaped via conditioning

Key Figures: John B Watson - classical behaviourism (environment shapes behaviour)

B F Skinner - operant conditioning (reinforcement and punishment)

Ivan Pavlov - classical conditioning (stimulus-response learning)

MKULTRA Application: Attempted to "retrain" behaviour by pairing compliance with rewards or relief from discomfort.

Used pain, deprivation, or disorientation as punishment; calm periods or privileges as reinforcement.

Sought to create conditioned triggers for specific behaviours (e.g., an object or phrase as a compliance cue).

Limitations: Behaviour change under coercion was unstable; subjects often developed resistance or trauma rather than permanent compliance.

Psychoanalysis & Trauma Theory

Core Idea: The unconscious mind influences behaviour; trauma can alter personality and make individuals more suggestible

Key Figures: Sigmund Freud – unconscious drives, repression

Anna Freud & ego psychology – ego weakening through stress

Pierre Janet – trauma and dissociation

MKULTRA Application: The "depatterning" process (Ewen Cameron) — breaking down ego structures via drugs, ECT, and isolation.

Followed by "psychic driving" — repeated messages to implant new beliefs/behaviours.

Explored whether trauma-induced suggestibility could be exploited for interrogation or programming.

Limitations: Trauma often caused unpredictable psychological damage rather than controlled suggestibility.

Hypnosis Theory

Core Idea: Altered states of consciousness can increase suggestibility and responsiveness to instructions

Key Researchers: Clark Hull, Milton Erickson

Research:

MKULTRA Application: Combining hypnosis with drugs to lower defences.

Testing if commands could be implanted and later triggered ("hypnotic courier" concept).

Using post-hypnotic suggestion to influence behaviour or recall.

Limitations: Effectiveness varied greatly between individuals; hypnosis couldn't force actions strongly opposed to a person's core morals in most cases.

Social Psychology

Core Idea: Human behaviour is shaped by group dynamics, authority, and social roles.

Key Figures & Studies: Solomon Asch – conformity experiments

Stanley Milgram – obedience to authority

Kurt Lewin – group influence and change



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Social Psychology (cont)

MKULTRA Application: Structuring interrogation environments where the experimenter's authority was absolute.

Using isolation to remove competing social influences.

Leveraging peer pressure among subjects in group experiments.

Limitations: Compliance under lab or captivity conditions didn't always transfer to real-world loyalty or obedience.

Cognitive Psychology

Core Idea: Mental processes such as memory, perception, and problem-solving can be studied and altered

Emerging Figures (1950s–60s): George Miller (memory capacity)

Ulric Neisser (cognitive psychology founder)

MKULTRA Application: Memory erasure: testing drugs and techniques to remove or block specific memories.

False memory implantation via hypnosis and suggestion.

Cognitive Psychology (cont)

Sensory distortion to disrupt perception of time, space, and reality.

Limitations: Memory suppression unreliable; false memories possible but unpredictable in content and retention.

Sensory Processing & Perceptual Psychology

Core Idea: The brain relies on consistent sensory input; altering sensory flow can disrupt mental stability

Key Figures: Donald Hebb (sensory deprivation research, McGill University)

MKULTRA Application: Sensory deprivation tanks to induce hallucinations and breakdown.

Sensory overload (bright lights, loud sounds) to fatigue attention and disrupt thinking.

Studying how perception collapse increased suggestibility.

Limitations: Severe perceptual disruption often caused psychosis or long-term anxiety rather than targeted compliance.

Learning Theory & Habituation

Core Idea: Repetition shapes learning; new habits can replace old ones under controlled conditions

MKULTRA Application: "Psychic driving" used repetitive audio loops to instill new beliefs.

Attempted to overwrite learned behaviours with new conditioning.

Limitations: Often led to confusion and distress; retention of implanted beliefs was inconsistent.

Psychopharmacology

Core Idea: Mental states and behaviours can be altered chemically by affecting neurotransmitter systems

Key Substances Used: LSD-25, mescaline, scopolamine, amphetamines, barbiturates

MKULTRA Application: Testing how altered neurochemistry affected perception, judgement, and susceptibility.

Seeking optimal drug combinations for "truth serum" effects.

Limitations: Effects were unpredictable; same dose could cause compliance in one subject and panic or aggression in another.



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