

John Broadus Watson Biography

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Contents

[John Broadus Watson Biography.....](#)1

[Contents.....](#)2

[Biography.....](#)3

Biography

John Broadus Watson (1878-1958) founded the behaviorist movement in American psychology. His view that only observable events, and not mental states, are the substance of psychology provided the behavioristic flavor that still characterizes much of psychology today.

John B. Watson was born on Jan. 9, 1878, on a farm near Greenville, S.C. At 16 he enrolled at Furman University and graduated 5 years later with a master's degree. He then entered the University of Chicago and in 1901 received his doctorate. His major in psychology was under J. R. Angell, his philosophy minor under John Dewey, and his neurology major under H. H. Donaldson.

Watson remained at Chicago as an assistant and instructor until 1908. During this period he married Mary Ickes. His empirical work focused on animal behavior and relied on white rats, monkeys, and birds as objects of study. In 1908 he moved to Johns Hopkins, where he remained until 1920. A widely publicized divorce action precipitated his resignation, withdrawal from academics, and a second marriage.

Watson was a highly productive scientist. During his time at Johns Hopkins, he published more than 35 papers, reports, and books. He was elected president of the American Psychological Association in 1915 and served as editor on a number of professional journals into the 1920s.

In 1913 Watson published the theoretical paper "Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It." This paper presented for the first time an articulated statement of behaviorism as a reaction to Wundtian psychology, characterized by the study of consciousness and the reliance on introspection to obtain data. For Watson, psychology was to become an "objective experimental branch of natural science." Consciousness could no longer be the substance of psychology, and introspection was an unreliable method because they both required mentalities language construction.

Watson strongly rejected any belief in instincts and indicated that it was a misnomer for early experiences. Differences in ability and talent originate in early experience in contrast to being innately determined.

In 1920 Watson went to work in advertising, where his perseverance and ability again caused him to be successful. Despite his withdrawal from professional psychology, he continued to write articles relevant to psychology for popular consumption. His second wife, Rosalie Rayner, died in 1934; Watson went into retirement in 1946 and lived in Woodbury, Conn. He died on Sept. 25, 1958, in New York City.