

Learning Theory – What Does The Evidence Say?



This activity will help you to:

- Develop skills of **interpreting and commenting on** psychological research studies (AO2)
- Develop skills of **evaluating** theories (AO2)
- Understand criticisms of the learning theory of eating disorders

Learning Theory of Anorexia

The learning theory states that anorexia is a set of behaviours acquired from the environment through operant conditioning and social learning. Learning theory makes two important predictions or hypotheses:

- Eating disorders will be more common where people are exposed to images of thin people as being attractive.
- Eating disorder symptoms will be more prevalent where people have the opportunity to learn about them.

What you need to do...

Below are some examples of research findings into eating disorders. For each example, write a short commentary. In each commentary you write...

- You must** explain whether it supports or challenges the learning theory of eating disorders.
- You should** also explain **why** the evidence supports or challenges the theory.
- You could** write another paragraph based around the prediction that, according to the learning theory, eating disorders will tend to run in families.

When you have completed a commentary on all the evidence, you could write a short conclusion explaining whether the evidence you have looked at supports the learning theory overall.

Remember, when writing commentary, you should always indicate that this is what you are doing. Use phrases like, 'this study supports...because...' or 'this result challenges...because...'

The Evidence

Barlow & Durand (1995) found that over half of contestants in the 'Miss America' beauty contest were 15% or more below the expected body weight for their height.

Fearn (1999) studied young women living on the island of Fiji. Before 1995, Fiji did not receive Western TV channels. These were introduced in 1995. By 1998, 74% of young Fijian women surveyed said they were 'too big or fat', and eating disorders, previously unknown on the island, had begun to appear.

Nasser (1986) compared Egyptian women studying in Cairo with similar Egyptian women studying in London. 12% of those living in London developed eating disorder symptoms, compared to 0% in Cairo.

Eysenck & Flanagan (2000) point out that, whilst virtually all young women in the West are exposed to the media, only 3-4% of them develop an eating disorder.