Behaviourists believe that all behaviour, both normal and abnormal, is learned through processes such as classical conditioning, operant conditioning and social learning. Discuss the behavioural approach to explaining psychological abnormality.

The behavioural approach concentrates on the behavioural response to a stimuli and how learning this response causes abnormal behaviour. It is split into 3 forms of learning, classical conditioning, operant conditioning and social learning.

Classical conditioning explains abnormal behaviour by leading to abnormal phobias. For example with the research study of Watson and Rayner with ‘Little Albert’, within their investigation little Albert gained a stimulus generalisation with fluffy animals. The term ‘stimulus generalisation’ means where an individual which gains a body response (in this case fear) by a stimulus (fluffy animal) associates anything similar to the stimulus with the response, so the individual ‘generalises’ the stimulus to other things similar. Stimulus generalisation explains abnormal behaviour because it indicates how phobias are made by the stimulus causing fear. This stimulus can be a traumatic encounter generating the response of fear, usually in childhood which characterises the phobia and the cause of extreme fear which is connects to similar situations to the traumatic encounter creating the stimulus generalisation. This then causes an abnormality by them being scared of certain things and situations, therefore explains phobias.

However classical conditioning does not explain the response of phobia’s which have no stimulus, for example someone being scared of snakes if they have never had a traumatic encounter with a snake or even encountered a snake. Also the response of ‘fear’ is too generalised and the explanation does not go into detail what fear is or different types of fear that is caused.

Operant conditioning explains abnormal behaviour by rewards. Operant conditioning explains to us that with rewards and encouragement we learn certain behaviours which become persistent habit even if the amount of rewards slowly decreases this pattern is called schedules of reinforcement, an example of this is gambling, even though you stop gaining more money, you still carry on gambling. Furthermore being punished causes an opposite effect and can cause an abnormality of the reduction of certain behaviour. This was Skinners approach saying that nurture of punishment and rewards whilst growing up shapes our abnormal behaviours, but operant conditioning focuses more on the consistency of the abnormalities rather than why we respond to the rewards, this then led to Skinners extension to the approach; the social learning theory. Lastly they suggest that because the symptoms are behavioural the cause will be, which may not be the case.

The social learning theory was proposed by Albert Bandura by letting children observe a Bobo doll being kicked and see if they copied the actions of the kicking. He concluded that when the children did kick the doll was due to vicarious learning, where they observed the consequences of someone’s actions and if they want the same outcome they will copy the same action; this is the social learning theory. Usually people want a good outcome therefore they follow role models which get rewards rather than punishment. The social learning theory overall helps explain abnormal behaviours such as anorexia by people viewing the celebrities rewards through the media and copy the look of the celebrity in order to obtain the same rewards.

Overall all these conditionings help explain abnormal behaviour such as phobias, consistency of behaviours and certain disorders. Classical conditioning shows us reflexive responses and operant is