

The Little Albert Experiment

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Original paper:

“Conditioned emotional reactions” (Watson & Rayner, 1920)

Reference for the original paper:

Watson, J. B., & Rayner, R. (1920). Conditioned emotional reactions. *Journal of experimental psychology*, 3(1), 1.

Link to original paper online:

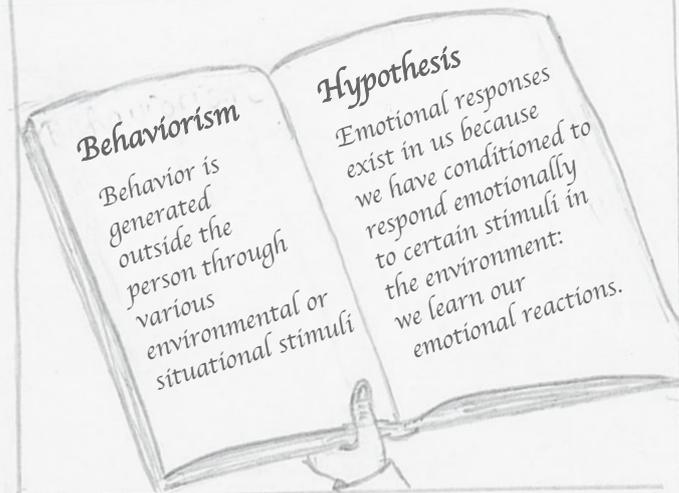
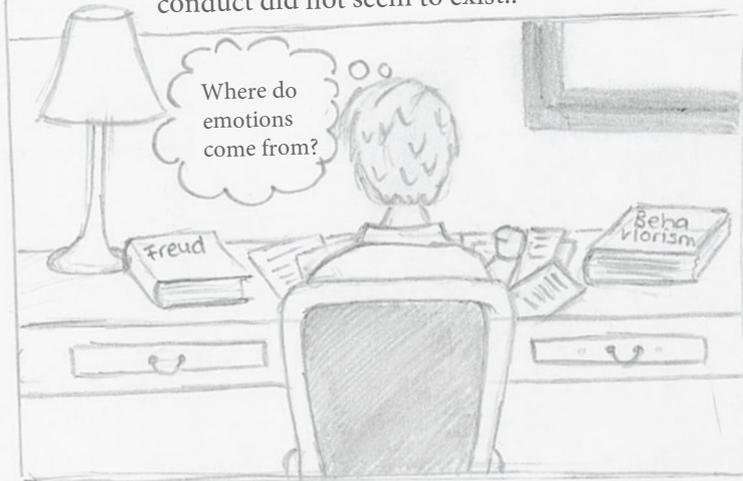
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Project created for the class:
Visual Thinking and Composition, Fall 2020
Tilburg University, Department of Communication and Cognition

Instructor: Neil Cohn, neilcohn@visuallanguagelab.com, www.visuallanguagelab.com

The Little Albert Experiment

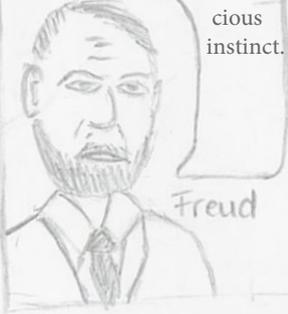
Going back to the 1920's where standards of ethical conduct did not seem to exist..



Behaviorism
 Behavior is generated outside the person through various environmental or situational stimuli

Hypothesis
 Emotional responses exist in us because we have conditionally respond emotionally to certain stimuli in the environment: we learn our emotional reactions.

Behaviour and specifically emotion, is generated internally through biological and unconscious instinct.



No, give me a healthy infant and I will prove that we are not born to fear, but that fear is learned through conditioning.



Watson went to an orphanage, where he asked the staff for the most healthy child, both emotionally and physically.



A subject, called Little Albert B., was recruited for this study at the age of 9 months.



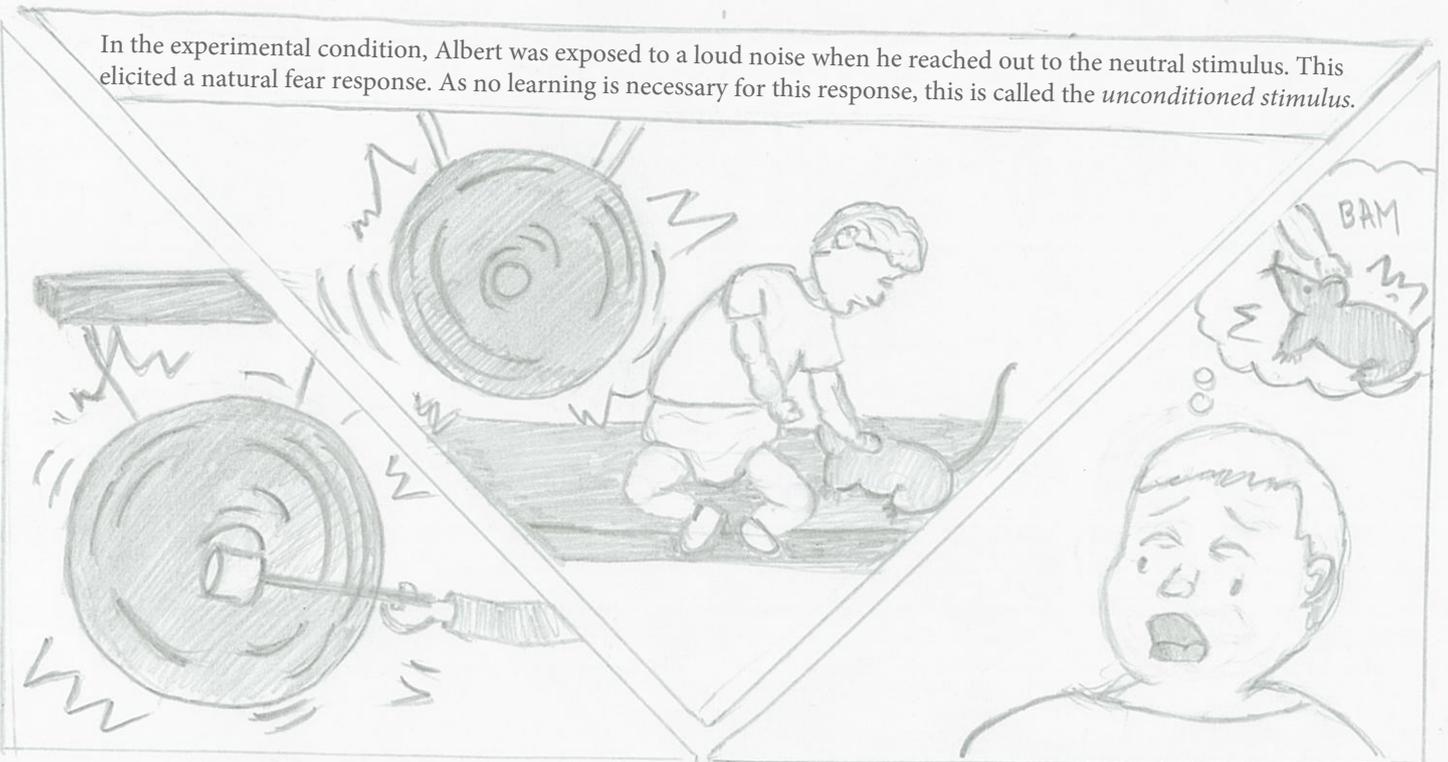
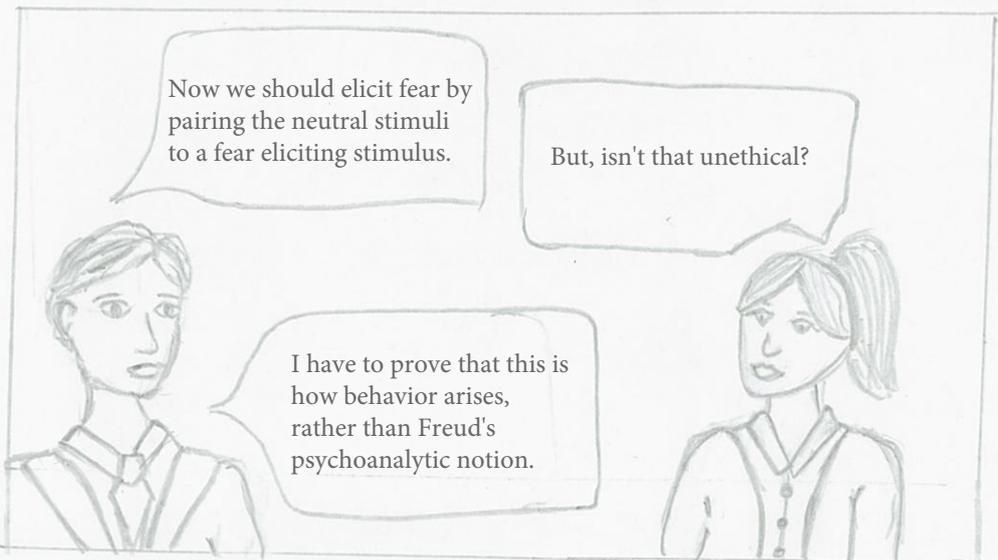
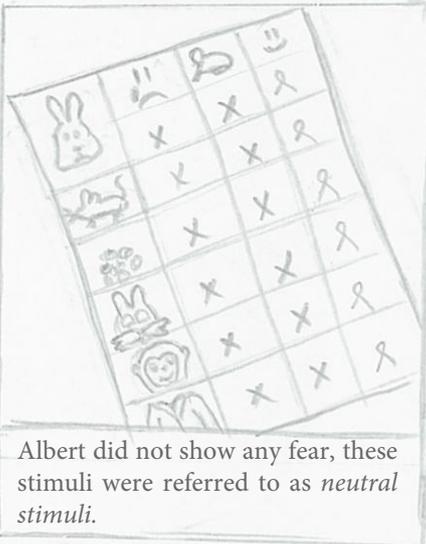
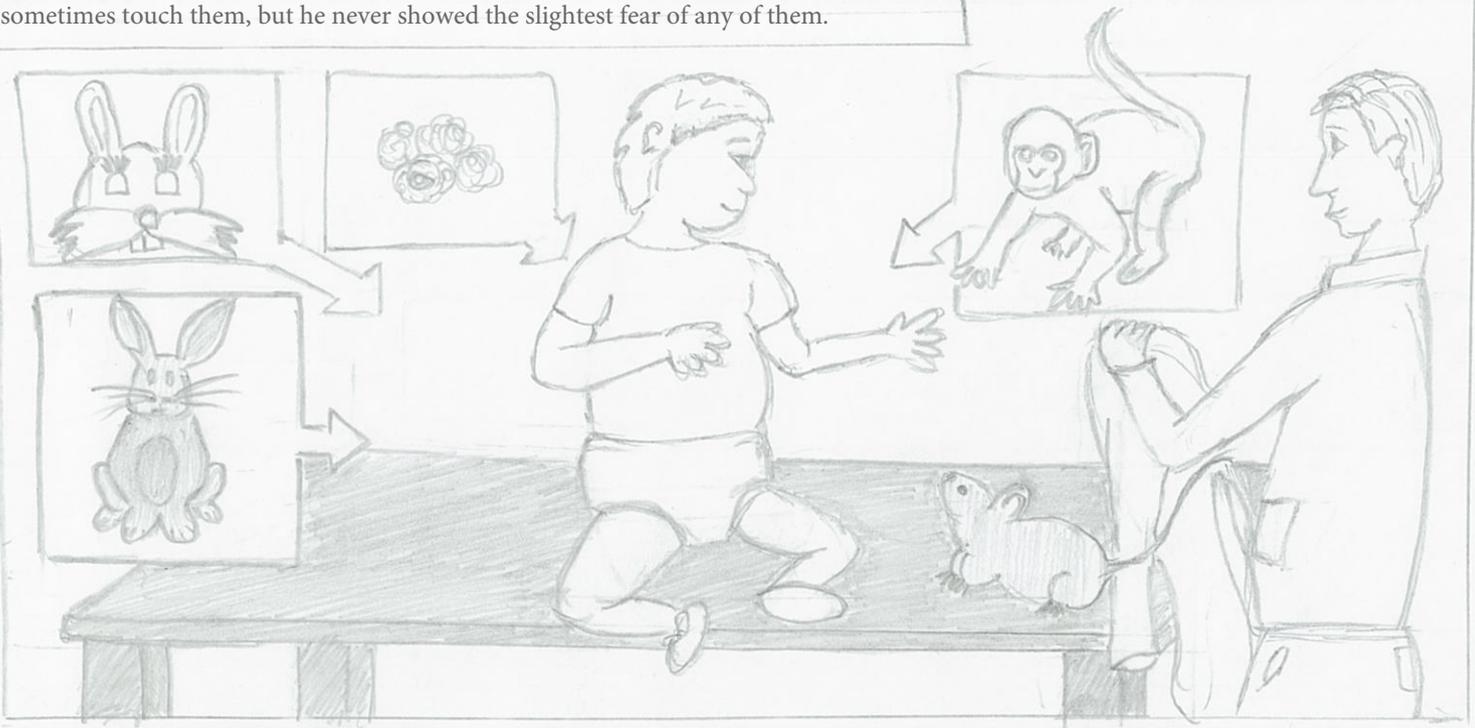
He was not brought up to the woods to be scared of owls.

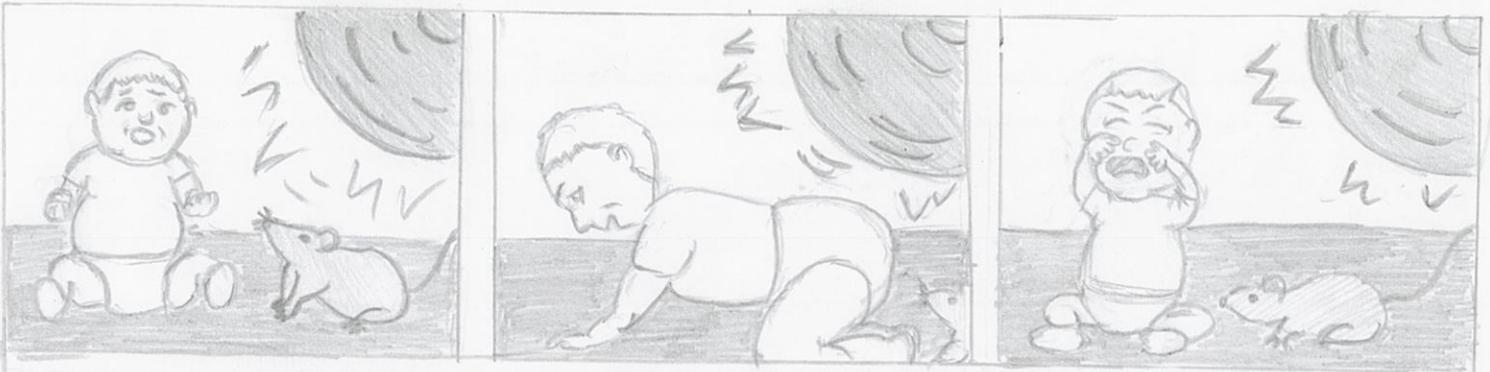


I hypothesize that I can elicit behavior even in a strong kid as Little Albert. If a stimulus that automatically produces a certain emotion in you, (such as fear) is repeatedly experienced at the same moment with something else, such as a rat, the rat will become associated in your brain with the fear.

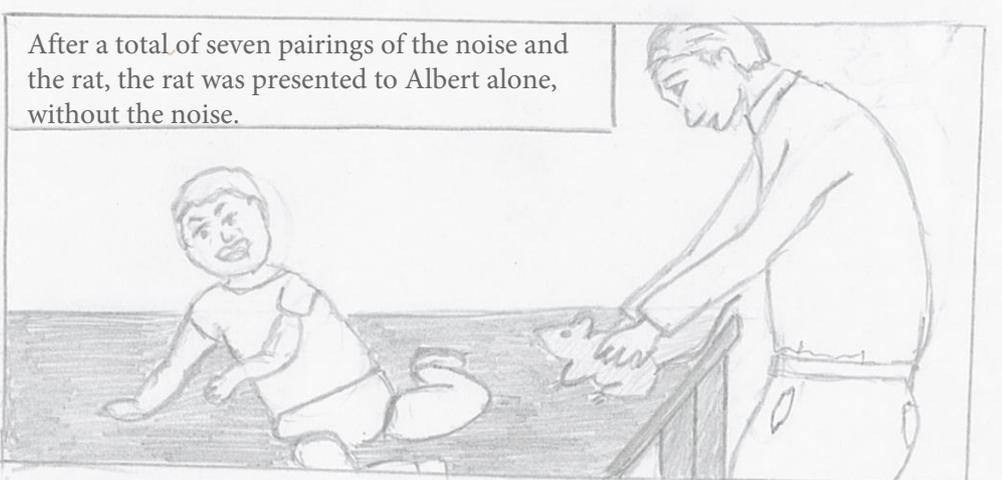


In order to check if Albert was afraid of anything, he was presented with certain stimuli. Albert was interested in the various animals and objects, He would reach for them and sometimes touch them, but he never showed the slightest fear of any of them.





The process was repeated multiple times. The noise startled and frightened him, it made him cry.



Objects similar to the rat were presented. "Negative responses began at once. He leaned as far away from the animal as possible, whimpered, then burst into tears and got up on all fours and crawled away."



Could his fear reaction be generalized to other neutral stimuli?

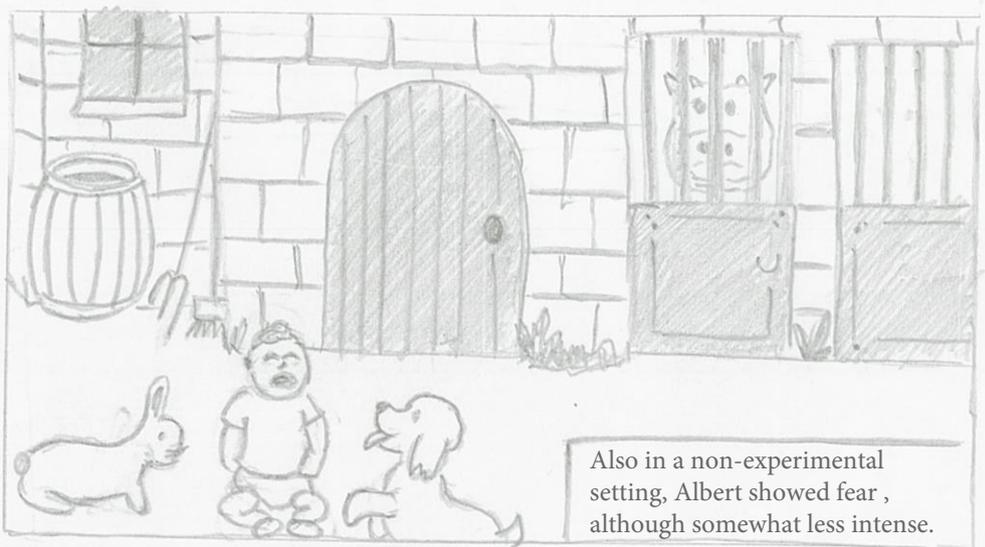
Albert reacted to all stimuli with fear, which is an indication of *generalization*, as these items had not been feared before.

Stimuli	Emotion	Response	Reflex
	Playfull	No crying	No startle reflex
	Fear	Crying	Crawl away
	Fear	Crying	Roll over
	Fear	Crying	Avoidance
	Panic	Screaming	Crawl away
	Fear	Crying	Hiding

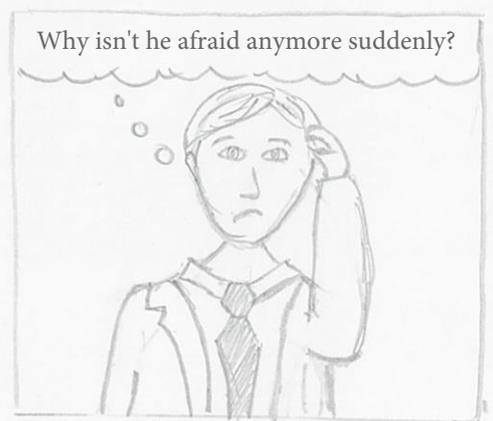
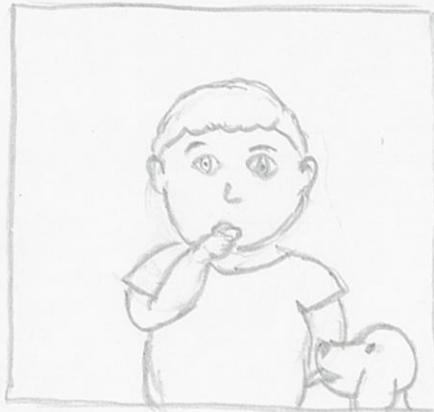
Another aspect of conditioned emotional responses Watson wanted to explore was whether the learned emotion would transfer from one situation to another, besides the generalization between furry objects.



He took Little Albert to the children's farm.



Also in a non-experimental setting, Albert showed fear, although somewhat less intense.



Why isn't he afraid anymore suddenly?



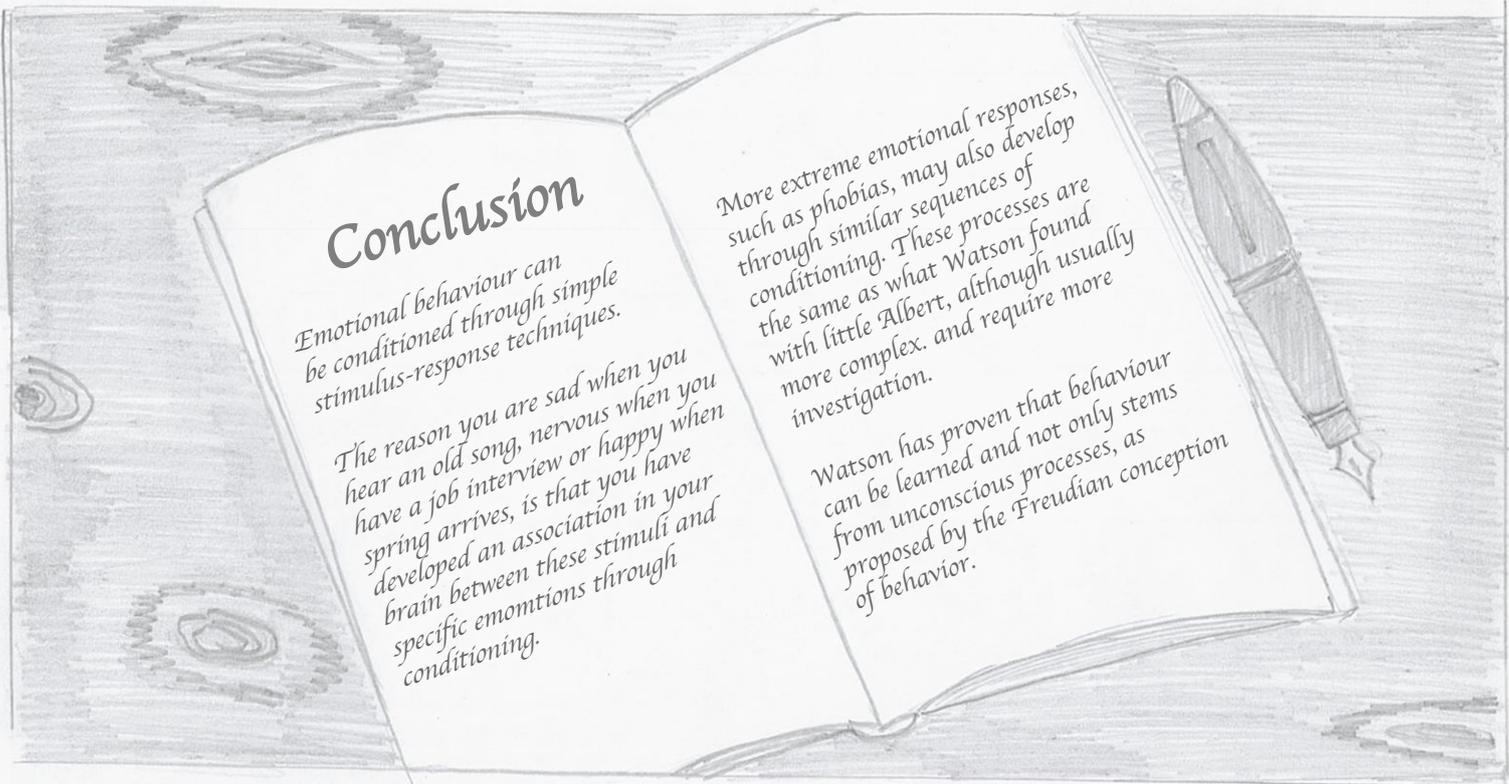
It looks like sucking his thumb is giving him nerves of steel and ceased being afraid.



Watson had to remove the thumb from the mouth before the conditioned response could be obtained.



During the course of these experiments, whenever Albert was on the verge of tears or emotionally upset he would continually thrust his thumb into his mouth. The moment the hand reached the mouth he became impervious to the stimuli producing fear. Thumb sucking became a compensatory device for blocking fear and noxious stimuli.



Conclusion

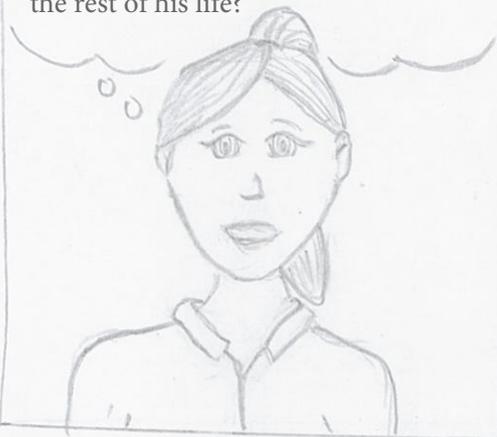
Emotional behaviour can be conditioned through simple stimulus-response techniques.

The reason you are sad when you hear an old song, nervous when you have a job interview or happy when spring arrives, is that you have developed an association in your brain between these stimuli and specific emotions through conditioning.

More extreme emotional responses, such as phobias, may also develop through similar sequences of conditioning. These processes are the same as what Watson found with little Albert, although usually more complex, and require more investigation.

Watson has proven that behaviour can be learned and not only stems from unconscious processes, as proposed by the Freudian conception of behavior.

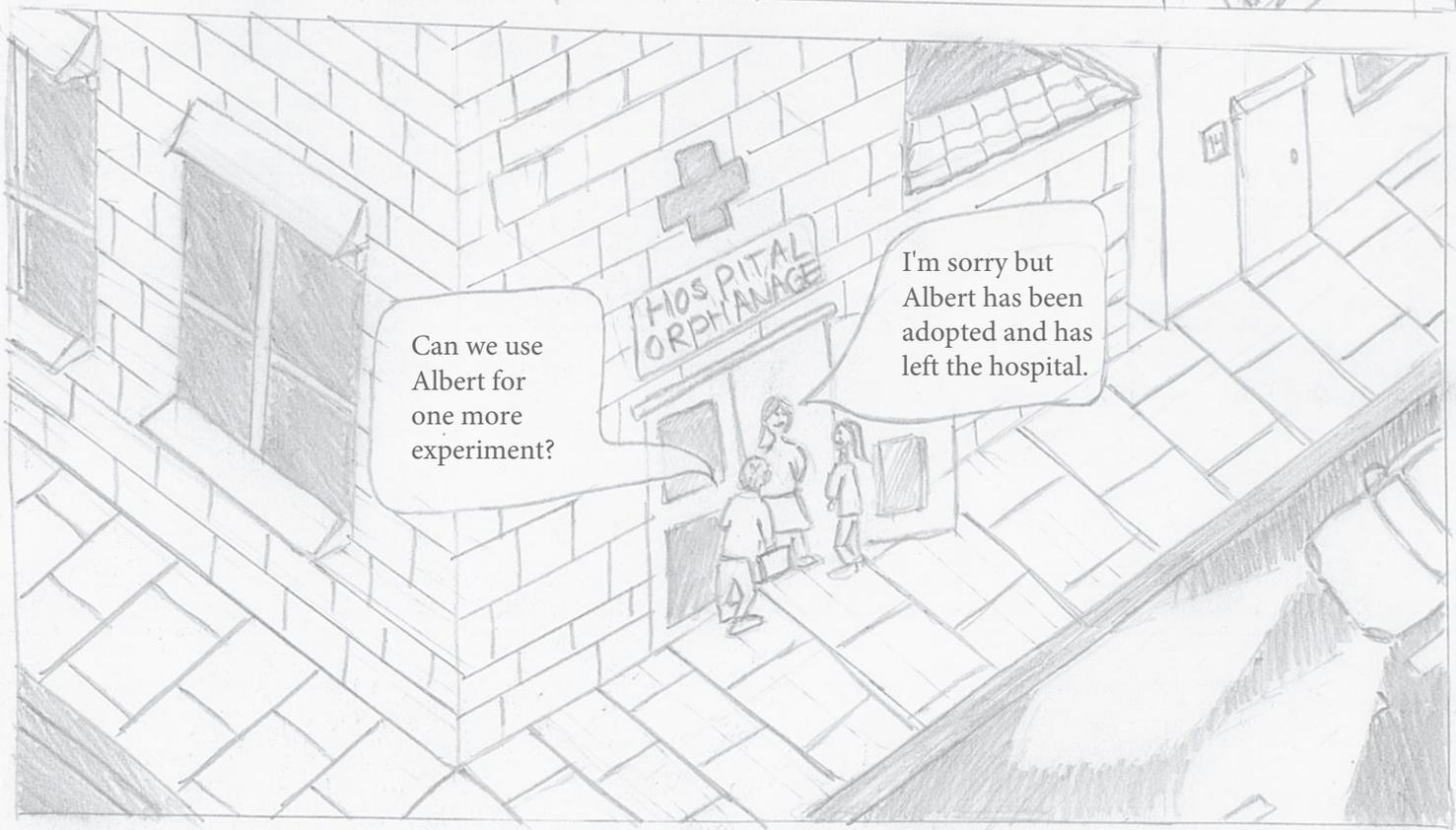
Poor little Albert, will he be afraid for the rest of his life?



I think we should recondition Albert, to eliminate his fearful reaction.



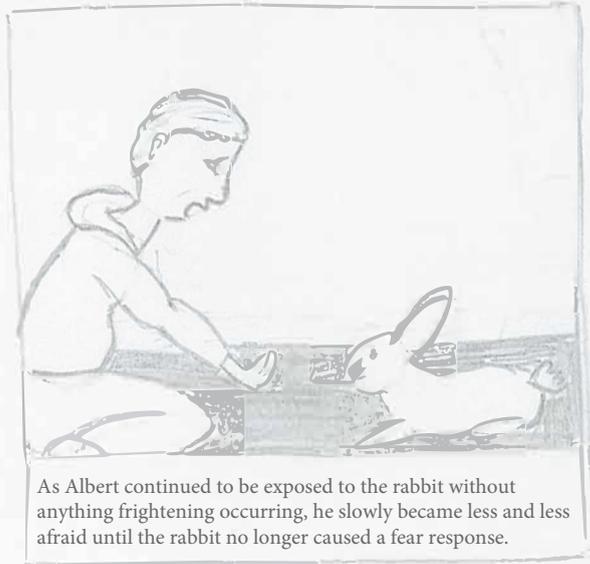
Yes, let's go back to the orphanage to pick up Little Albert.



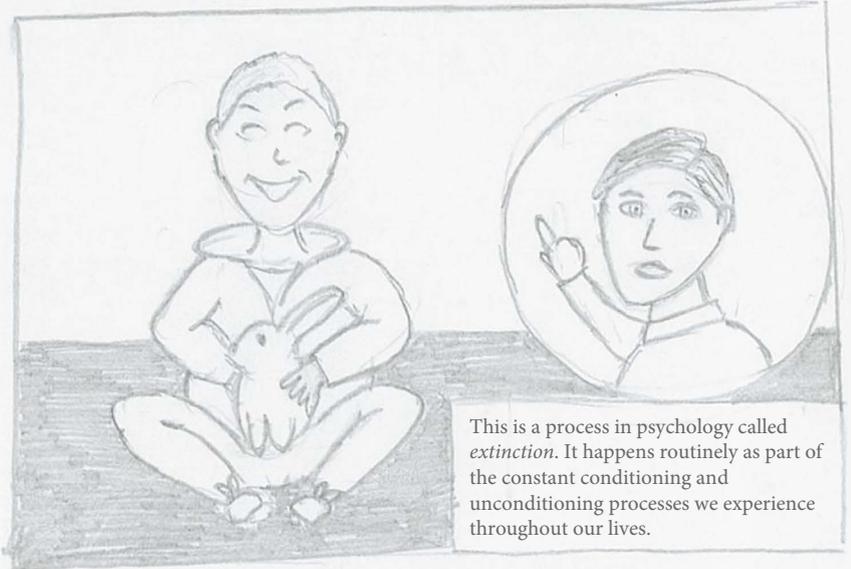
Can we use Albert for one more experiment?

I'm sorry but Albert has been adopted and has left the hospital.

7 years later...



As Albert continued to be exposed to the rabbit without anything frightening occurring, he slowly became less and less afraid until the rabbit no longer caused a fear response.



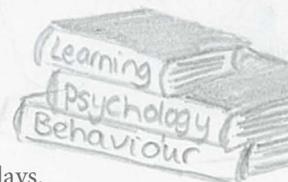
This is a process in psychology called *extinction*. It happens routinely as part of the constant conditioning and unconditioning processes we experience throughout our lives.

parenting & child development

phobias



conditioning



Watson's and Raynor's experiment has become a strikingly powerful piece of research, which can find citations and implications in a wide range of fields nowadays.