

Operant conditioning or instrumental conditioning

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BF Skinner has made an important contribution to the study of learning by his work on another form of conditioning called operant or instrumental conditioning. He distinguishes between respondent behavior and operant behavior, the former being elicited by specific stimuli and the latter being emitted spontaneously by the organism, such as the random pecking behavior of pigeons. Operant conditioning operates on the environment and the learned behavior is instrumental in controlling events.

Skinner's view of operant conditioning is that it is not a sequence of stimulus-response connections, but rather that behavior is spontaneously emitted by the organism. He tends to disregard the role of stimuli (Quinn, 2000). A desired target behavior can then be reinforced, which increases the likelihood of this behavior can be punished, which decreases the likelihood of this behavior in the future.

Positive reinforcement increases the target behavior by rewarding the individual. This reward can be tangible (money, a treat) or intangible (praise, an approving look). Importantly, what is rewarding to each individual may be different. A lot of people puzzle negative reinforcement with punishment.

Negative reinforcement, however, increases the target behavior, while punishment has the opposite effect (Vito, Maahs, & Holmes, 2006).

Superstitious behavior can be established by accidental positive reinforcement contingencies. Escape behavior can also be involved in an accidental or superstitious contingency when a response is followed by removal or reduction of a negative reinforce. The response, however, is only accidentally or coincidentally associated with removal of the stimulus, and its

removal is not contingent on performance of the escape performance (Sundel & Sundel, 2005).

Unlike reinforcement, punishment reduces the odds of the target behavior being repeated. Through experimentation with both animals and humans, behaviorists have developed a knowledge base about the most effective way to condition behavior. One golden rule is that the consistency of reinforcement and punishment matters more than severity. Indeed, parental use of harsh but inconsistent punishment is a good predictor of delinquent behavior. Additionally, reinforcement shapes behavior more efficiently than punishment – psychologists recommend that reinforcers outnumber punishers by a ration of four to one. Finally, both punishment and reinforcement should follow quickly after the target behavior (Vito et al., 2006).

References:

Quinn, F. M. (2000). *The Principles and Practice of Nurse Education* (4th ed.). London: Nelson Thomes.

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Vito, G. F., Maahs, J. R., & Holmes, R. M. (2006). *Criminology: Theory, Research, and Policy* (2nd ed.). New York: Jones & Bartlett Publishers.