

Essay on operant conditioning

[Law](#), [Criminal Justice](#)



In *Introduction to Psychology: Gateways to Mind and Behavior* (2012), Coon and Mitterer write, “ The principles of operant conditioning [] are among the most powerful tools in psychology” (pg. 226). The definition of operant conditioning is a form of learning in which reinforcement increases the probability of a response. A response that is followed by a reinforcing stimulus is more likely to reoccur. Operant conditioning explains much day-to-day behavior. Every individual lives his or her life according to the reinforcement they receive after performing an action. This kind of learning is operant conditioning—“ learning based on the consequences of responding” (Coon & Mitterer, 2012, pg. 226). Operant conditioning deals with reinforcement and the strengthening of behaviors. Individuals are cognizant and make voluntary responses based on consequences. Operant conditioning involves two parts: reinforcer and reinforcement. Reinforcer is stimuli that increase the chances of the same recurring response.

Reinforcement is the act of following a response with a reinforcer. Operant conditioning differs from classical conditioning. In *Consumer Psychology*, Boyd explains the difference between classical and operant conditioning: “ In classical conditioning, the response occurs after the stimulus has been presented but in operant conditioning, the response takes place prior to the stimulus being presented” (pg. 29). In operant conditioning, the individual’s response is voluntary. He or she actively operates on the environment to bring about reinforcement. In classical conditioning, however, the individual is passive and the response is involuntary.

B. F. Skinner, the American psychologist most commonly associated with the scientific study of operant conditioning, used the Operant Conditioning

Chamber, a device called a Skinner box, to study operant behavior. Skinner found that consequences played a large role in the rats' behavior. For example, when a rat pulled a lever, he would receive food. As a result, the rat would repeatedly pull on the lever. In *What is Psychology? Essentials*, Pastorino and Doyle-Portillo discuss how Skinner's experiments show that "in operant conditioning, the animal makes a choice to respond to its environment in a certain way. In this type of learning, behavior operates on the environment to produce some consequence" (p. 181).

There are different categories and types of reinforcement. Primary reinforcers are consequences that satisfy a biologically built-in need, such as food, shelter and oxygen. Secondary reinforcement—also known as conditioned reinforcement—refers to a situation in which a stimulus reinforces a behavior after it has been associated with a primary reinforcer. These examples are more complex than primary reinforcers. Money can be used to reinforce behaviors because it can be used to acquire primary reinforcers. Consequences such as praise and feelings of success are also secondary reinforcers.

There are also extrinsic and intrinsic reinforcers. Extrinsic reinforcers come from the outside environment and are often visible or tangible, such as praise, money and accolades. Intrinsic reinforcers, on the other hand, come from an individual's self. This includes the love of participating in an activity or the joy that comes from learning something new. Physical activity is an example of both extrinsic and intrinsic reinforcement. If a person exercises to change their appearance, such as becoming slimmer or more muscular, they are being reinforced extrinsically. However, if that individual exercises

to simply reap the benefits of increased energy, higher levels of endorphins and overall happiness, this is intrinsically reinforced.

There are different types of reinforcement. Positive reinforcement is a reinforcing consequence that increases the likelihood of the behavior. These can include food, praise, money and intrinsic reinforcement. Negative reinforcement is the strengthening of a behavior because something negative or unpleasant is removed from the situation, or the situation is escaped or avoided. For instance, leaving the house early to avoid getting stuck in traffic and being late for work is an example of negative reinforcement. Another example is completing homework assignments in order to avoid getting in trouble with the teacher or feeling the disappointment of one's parents. By eliminating undesirable outcomes, the preventative behaviors become more likely to occur again in the future. Therefore, both positive and negative reinforcement strengthen the behavior.

In positive reinforcement, a stimulus is presented. In negative reinforcement, however, a stimulus is removed. Negative reinforcement is often wrongly confused with punishment. Punishment is a consequence that lessens the probability of the response it follows. This can involve the presentation of undesirable stimulus, such as a classroom teacher giving a student more homework as punishment for bad behavior. It can also involve the removal of pleasant stimulus, such as a student losing recess privileges because they failed to turn in their homework. Positive and negative reinforcement strengthen behaviors and responses, whereas punishment acts to decrease a response. Positive punishment adds something to decrease behavior, while

negative punishment removes something to decrease behavior. Punishment should therefore be avoided because it does not promote or teach desired behaviors.

Negative reinforcement seems to be the most efficient at causing necessary change in an individual. For example, if an individual tends to indulge in unhealthy foods, negative reinforcement could cause him or her to have to pay five dollars for every item of junk food consumed. This would quickly escalate into the individual being highly resistant to doling out dollar after dollar for each muffin, candy bar, or soda. The individual could very easily end their addiction to unhealthy food. Negative reinforcement, however, cannot sustain results. Long-term, negative reinforcement does not instill a sense of accomplishment or positive emotion. In fact, in the context of unhealthy foods, one might grow an even healthier resentment towards food in general. This could catapult into even greater addiction, or worse, extreme restriction. In the end, positive reinforcement stands as the most steadfastly effective method in not only achieving optimal behavior but also an ideal attitude. For example, instead of being charged five dollars and not eating junk food in order to avoid having to pay the fee, positive reinforcement would replace the junk food with balanced meals combined with both intrinsic and extrinsic reinforcers, such as a more taut body, compliments from friends and family, and an increased sense of well-being due to more nutritious foods. This provides not only beneficial behavior but also instills a spirit of positivity within the individual.

Positive reinforcement is crucial in maintaining healthy relationships, particularly romantic ones. If a man is negatively reinforced into behavior

that the woman desires, he will soon become resentful of the tacit manipulation and control. A woman may deny intercourse to a man if a he does not take her out to dinner every week. In order to avoid this, a man may find himself feeling increasingly unhappy about the fact that he has to take the woman out to dinner every week in order to sustain the physical part of their relationship. Though effective, the heart with which the man performs the desired behavior is not ideal. If the woman were to, on the other hand, praise the man each time he does something well, he would feel more likely to repeat that act. If she were to appreciate him again and again, he would feel increasingly uplifted and therefore self-propelled in his generous actions towards his partner. The reinforcement schedule that would create a loving, harmonious relationship would involve a conscious practice of gratitude and appreciation towards the other, recognizing even small efforts on their part. Rather than avoiding a consequence by increasing behavior, one is encouraged to practice certain behavior because of the positive emotions stirred up within. There is no strain, pressure, tension, manipulation, or stress. This would undoubtedly secure an ideal, free-flowing relationship.

References

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