Personality in operant conditioning and social cognitive learning

B. F. Skinner (1904-1990) and Albert Bandura (b. 1925) play an important role in the field of learning in psychology, their theory are useful to understand one's behavior, The theory that developed by Skinner is operant conditioning, and Bandura developed the theory of social learning theory. Even though both theories are focused on behavior of an individual, they hold a different view on person and their theory are based on difference hypothesis. In the following section, both theories will be discussed and compare their strength and limitation.

Personality in Skinner's view

Skinner said:

"…The practice of looking inside the organism for an explanation of behavior has tended to obscure the variables which are immediately available for a scientific analysis. These variables lie outside the organism, in its immediate environment and in its environmental history…the objection to inner states is not that they do not exist, but that they are not relevant …"(as cited in Pierce, W. D., & Cheney, C. D.)

Skinner believes that the inner state of a person is not important to explain one's behavior, focused on the external variables is a scientific method to understand one's personality development.

Personality from Skinner perspective is a collection of response tendencies that are tied to various stimulus situations, behavior of an individual is determined by the environment, change of the external will lead the change of one's behavior, so the personality development is a live long process

determined by various external stimuli, and therefore no special importance to early childhood experiences.

B. F. Skinner applied the principles of operant conditioning to explain the development and maintenance of personality.

Operant Conditioning

There are two basic assumptions in Operant conditioning, which are (1) an action result in an experience is consequence of that action, and (2) the perception of an action's consequence affect one's future behavior.

In the principles of operant conditioning, there are six behavior techniques including reinforcement, punishment, shaping, extinction, discrimination, and generalization.

Reinforcement

Reinforcement is the process in which a behavior is strengthened, and thus, more likely to happen again. There are two type of reinforcement, which are positive reinforcement and negative reinforcement. Positive reinforcement is consequences involve something pleasant that follows a behavior and increases the chances that the behavior will occur again, for example, I like watching cartoon much when I was young, in order to increase the piano practice time of me, my mum using positive reinforcement, link up the time of practice piano and watch cartoon, the more time I practice the more time I can watch cartoon. Differently, negative reinforcement occurs when an individual learns to perform a specific behavior in order to cause something unpleasant to stop. There are two type of reinforce, primary and secondary.

The former refer to the innate reinforce, such as food; the latter refer to those we learnt or conditioned associated with primary reinforcer, the typical example is money, we learnt that money(second reinforcer) can buy food (primary reinforcer), so we work to gain money (second reinforcer) to satisfy the need of food (primary reinforcer).

Shaping

Sometimes learning a new behavior is quite complex, shaping is a way to teaching a new behavior by successively reinforcing responses that similar it, until the target behavior achieved eventually. Learning to say " good morning" to others is hard for me when I was young, my mother shape me to say " good morning" to others by reinforcing my similar behavior of saying " Hi!" with others, every time I say " Hi!" my mother will show a big smile and tell me " mom love you more if you can say " Good morning" instead of " Hi" to others." In order to get the love from my mum, I turned from say " Hi!" to " Good morning" after a period of time.

Punishment

In contrast to both types of reinforcement, punishment can stop a behavior. It is defined by its effect. There are two types of punishment, negative punishment and positive punishment. Negative Punishment is reducing a behavior by removing a pleasant stimulus when the behavior occurs while positive punishment is reducing a behavior by presenting an unpleasant stimulus when the behavior occurs.

Extinction

Punishment is effective in reducing undesirable behavior only in the short-term, skinner criticized that punishment may generate unintended responses, such as negative emotional responses (fears or anxiety), the more effective and human ways to control one's behavior called extinction. It means the response rate of a behavior decrease with the withdrawal of reinforcement.

Stimulus generalization and Discrimination learning

Both reinforcement and punishment will generalize or discriminate by an individual. Stimulus generalization to help one's enable consistent behavior across similar situation, a behavior may be performed in more than one situation is called generalization, take me as an example, a candy would be given by parent when I tidy my own desk at young, generalize the situation from one to others, I tried to clean the dinning desk even no rewarded will be given. In contrast, discrimination learning help one's to enable the context-specific behaviors, individual will give different appropriate response to the same stimulus depends on the environmental signals.

Strengths and Limitations of Operant conditioning in Personality psychology

The idea of operant conditioning helps us find out the causes of behavior in the way more scientifically (from unobservable variable to observable variable). However, Skinner's theory focus much on the environment, the unique characteristics of an individual have been neglected, such as genetic factor, cognitive, complex emotion and social factors, etc. Neglected of the

uniqueness of the person disqualifies it as a personality theory but it is very useful to use the theory study individual's behavior in a scientific way.

Personality in Bandura's view

Bandura, who's developed social-cognitive learning theory, thinks that human are conscious, thinking and feeling being. Personality in his view is largely shaped by learning, but, the process of conditioning is not mechanical, people as are passive participants as the Skinner view. He thinks that people having initially to seek out and process information around them to maximize the best outcomes.

Social-Cognitive Theory

Social-Cognitive theories are more influential among developmental psychologists than those of the conditioning theorists. Albert Bandura (b. 1925) argues that learning does not always require reinforcement, his theory focus on how the interaction of behavior, environment, and our views of self-efficacy could interact to explain personality. There are three main ideas in Social learning theory which are Reciprocal determinism, Observational learning, and Self efficacy.

Reciprocal Determinism

Behavior is not simply a function of environment or person variables; it is interacting and influences between person, behavior and environment. Choosing the course in my associate degree is an example, the course in the PolyU HKCC is well known and have a good reputation among universities (environment), so I choose to select this school (behavior), and I found that the courses provided in the school are interesting (personal) and I worked

harder in class (behavior) and got a good result to lead my self-efficacy increased (personal).

Observational learning

Bandura state that people learn new behavior through overt reinforcement or punishment, or via observational learning of the social factors in their environment. Bandura believed that learning may also occur as a result of watching others perform some action and experience reinforcement or punishment, which is called observational learning or modeling. Different from operant learning, observational learning is not an entirely automatic process, observer learns from watching others depend on two cognitive elements, which are attention and memory. Moreover, physically available and motivation are needed in order to act out a behavior.

Self-efficacy

Bandura indicated that as a child, we learn not only overt behavior, but also expectations and standards, etc. so at the same time, we acquire expectancies about what we can and cannot do which Bandura (1997) calls self-efficacy. Individual use personal successful and failure experience to determine the capability to finish the task. Knowing that I am good at computer and got high grade in secondary, I have a high-efficacy for computer learning, it lead me have an expectation that I can get good grade without pay much attention in the subject of IT in my associate degree, so the behavior of skip several lecture exist.

Strengths and Limitations of Social-Cognitive theory

The theory of Bandura helps to explain how models influence behavior, compare with others learning theories, social-cognitive theory explains more about development since it has include of cognitive and emotional factor of a person. However, the social-cognitive does not provide an overall picture of development of a person.

Conclusion

All in all, personality development is a complicated process. None of the stand-alone theory can explain the development of personality fully. In the learning perceptive, personality is greatly influenced by the external stimulus, but environment is not the only element, the uniqueness of an individual should take in account. Social-cognitive learning theory includes the interaction between external, behaviors and cognitive, emotion of a person, it is comprehensively than operant-conditioning to explain the personality development of an individual, however it also has its limitation.