Phobias and addictions research paper sample

Health & Medicine, Addiction

In the study of behavioral psychology, it is important to understand the motivation behind phobias and addictions. Phobia is an irrational fear associated with a certain stimuli, while addiction is a state developed from engaging in habit-forming behaviors. However, both phobia and addiction come as a result of learning. The two most important processes that cause phobia and addiction are classical and operant conditioning. Although both concepts result in learning, the processes differ.

Classical conditioning occurs when a neutral stimulus pairs up with an unconditioned response. A good example is Ivan Pavlov’s study with dogs. In the study, the dogs associated ringing of the bell with feeding them. As a result, the dogs would salivate at the sound of ringing bell, even when no food was served. Operant conditioning, on the other hand, occurs from the enforcement, or discouragement, of certain behaviors through reward and punishment. A good example of operant conditioning is rewarding children with a trip after doing well in exams. The possibility of a reward motivates the children to do well in exams, and this stimulates positive operant conditioning in the children. Conversely, operant conditioning can also be used to discourage negative behaviors.

Classical conditioning plays an instrumental role in the development of fear. When the fear goes to the extent of interfering with daily functioning, then, it becomes phobia. The process through which this happens is simple; a naturally occurring environmental stimulus that produces unconditional response is paired up with a neutral stimulus and, after repeating the process for several times, this prompts the conditioned stimulus to produce the same effect as the naturally occurring stimulus. With time, the effect

becomes more pronounced as individuals associate certain sights and sounds with certain fears that affect their daily functioning.

For instance, if someone sees and hears a crashing airplane, this might create an irrational fear for airplanes. Although travelling by airplane could be dangerous, if it goes to the extent of making someone to be avoid travelling by airplanes throughout their life, this would be considered a case of phobia.

The other case of associative learning is operant conditioning that is responsible for the development of addictions. Naturally, animals (including human beings) have a survival mechanism that enables them to experience pleasure and pain. Both sensations of pain and pleasure are controlled by the release of neurotransmitters from the brain. When someone learns something new, this prompts the formation of new neural pathways in the brain. Neurotransmitters then enforce the new pathways after experiencing pain or pleasure from a particular behavior.

When it comes to addiction with drugs, operant learning comes to play because the initial process of taking the drugs stimulates feelings of pleasure that are hardwired into the brain. When the individual withdraws from taking the drugs, he/she experiences feelings of pain that are also hardwired into the brain. As a result, the individual is most likely to take the drugs again to avoid the discomfort of withdrawal. When the process is repeated again and again, this leads to addiction. However, it is possible for such behaviors to become extinct.

Extinction is the process through which undesirable behaviors are eliminated. In operant conditioning, extinction occurs when a certain

behavior is not reinforced, or when the process of reinforcement loses value to the subject. In most cases, the use of punishment is used to eliminate the bad behavior. However, this creates scenario where the old behavior pops up, if the punisher is no longer there. In operant conditioning, the best means to ensure extinction is through replacement behavior. For example, if an autistic child does not get what they want and resort to banging their heads on the table, the teacher can devise another means that get the child's attention. For instance, the teacher may use an aide which lets the kid express what they want through a picture. When the picture exchange program is rewarded and banging heads on the table is ignored, there is a possibility that such behavior will become extinct.

However, not all behaviors become extinct through reward and punishment; sometimes, it occurs through lack of interest. For example, if a parent rewards his/her children with new clothes after they do well in exams, the children may perform well in the first few terms, then, their performance drops because it is no longer desirable to receive the same clothes after the end of each term. In the end, the child's performance goes back to where it used to be. In this case, the operant conditioning becomes extinct because the subject loses interest.

In classic conditioning, extinction is also possible if the conditioned stimulus is not presented with the unconditional stimulus. Going back to Ivan Pavlov's study with dogs, the conditioned stimulus (ringing the bell) became extinct when it was not paired with the unconditional stimulus (food). When the bell was rung on several occasions without bringing food to the dogs, the association between food and the sound of the bell reduced. Consequently,

the salivation response became extinct.

The study of classical and operant conditioning is essential in behavioral modification. Phobias and addictions result from learned behaviors that are developed from both classical and operant conditioning. Conversely, behaviors that lead to phobias and addictions can be unlearned. However, before this is possible, the behaviors that lead to the development of phobias and addictions have to be extinct.

References

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