

Skinner theory of operant conditioning

Psychology



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Skinner Theory of Operant Conditioning by B. F. Skinner is one of the most influential persons in scientific psychology. Prof. Skinner dedicated his efforts to behavior studying and formulated his theory of operant conditioning after a number of experiments on rats and pigeons. The theory is grounded on certain operations and actions that are carried out by organism. “ Operant” in this case can be regarded as any actions or conditions that influence organism and make it do something. The process of operant conditioning is the process during which reinforcement serves as a way to change operants. Though the theory looks complicated the idea behind it is very simple: if someone wants to increase some positive behavior, he has to reinforce this behavior with a reward and if there is a need to stop some behavior it is necessary to punish or let it die out by not providing any reinforcement it. Most behavior theorists presumed that if there is no stimulus there is no adequate response. While Skinner did not agree with this statement and considered that most of the responses could not be explained by known stimuli. He differentiated between two types of responses: the reaction to known stimuli which got the name reflexive, and the one provoked by unknown stimuli. So Skinner insisted on greater value of response in behavior change and modification compared to Pavlov`s model of stimuli. Operation Conditioning presupposes the following process:

Shaping is the process of clever and selective usage of reinforcement for stimulating of necessary behavior. There are three psychological concepts that are important for shaping: generalization, habit competition, and link of the segments in a stage

Extinction is an external way of influence which means letting some behavior pattern to extinct by not reinforcing it;

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Spontaneous Recovery is the ability of memory to reemerge already extinguished behavioral patterns spontaneously;

Reinforcement is the key concept in Skinner`s theory. It is the stimulus the change of which provokes a response in behavior. Positive reinforces increase the probability of response while negative reinforces decrease it. Skinner thought that reinforcement is more influential in behavior shaping than motivation. A rat or a pigeon is reinforced by food while a student is reinforced by the knowledge of the correct answer. He also emphasized the value of extinction in the process of behavior shaping which means that there is no need in punishment of some negative behavior as it is possible not to reinforce it and let it die out.

There are schedules of reinforcement elaborated by the psychologist as the result of external approach:

Fixed Interval Reinforcement which means reinforcement is provided after a certain period of time;

Fixed Ratio Reinforcement is when reinforcement is provided after certain number of responses;

Variable-Interval Ratio Reinforcement means reinforcement is provided after different periods and number of responses.

Operant Conditioning can be utilized to interpret various types of behavior such as learning behavior, addiction and others. There also exists a concept of token economy which presupposes a reward of positive behavior with tokens (money, sweets, stickers, privileges). It also has practical application in schools, prisons, and hospitals. So Skinner`s theory played a crucial role for scientific psychology development and shaped the way psychologist interpret behavior now. It is also known as one of the most practical and

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observable theories.

References

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