

LEARNING THEORY AND BEHAVIOURAL PSYCHOLOGY

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Learning can be defined as the process leading to relatively permanent behavioural change or potential behavioural change. In other words, for we learn, we alter the way we perceive our environment, the way we interpret the incoming stimuli, and therefore the way we interact, or behave. John B. Watson (1878- 1958) was the first to study how the process of learning affects our behaviour, and he formed the school of thought known as Behaviourism. The central idea behind behaviourism is that only observable behaviors are worthy of research since other abstraction such as a person's mood or thoughts are too subjective. This belief was dominant in psychological research in the United States for a good 50 years.

Perhaps the most well known is B. F. Skinner (1904-1990), Skinner moved away from Watson's research and found but believed that internal states could influence behaviour just as external stimuli: He is considered to be a Radical Behaviourist because of this belief, although nowadays it is believed that both internal and external stimuli influence our behaviour. Behavioural Psychology is basically interested in how our behaviour results from the stimuli both in the environment and within ourselves. They study, often in minute detail, the behaviors we exhibit while (for example), other variables as possible. Often a grueling process, but results have helped us learn a great deal about our behavior, the effect our environment has on us, how we learn new behaviors, and what motivates us to change or remain the same.

Classical Conditioning. One important type of learning, Classical Conditioning, was actually discovered accidentally by Ivan Pavlov (1849-1936). Pavlov was a Russian physiologist who discovered this phenomenon while doing research on digestion. His research was aimed at better understanding the digestive patterns in dogs. During his experiments, he would put meat powder in the mouths of dogs who had tubes inserted into various organs to measure bodily responses. What he discovered was that the dogs began to salivate before the meat powder was presented to them. Then, the dogs began salivate as soon as the person feeding them entered the room. He soon began to gain interest in this phenomenon and abandoned his digestion research in favor of his now famous Classical Conditioning study.

Basically, the findings support the idea that we develop responses to certain stimuli that are not naturally occurring. When we touch a hot stove, our reflex pulls our hand back. It does this instinctually, no learning involved. It is merely a survival instinct. But why now do some people, after getting burned, pull their hands back even when the stove is not turned on? Pavlov discovered that we make associations which cause us to generalize our response to one stimuli onto a neutral stimuli it is paired with. In other words, hot burner ouch, stove burner, therefore, stove ouch. Pavlov began pairing a bell sound with the meat powder and found that even when the meat powder was not presented, the dog would eventually begin to salivate after hearing the bell. Since the meat powder naturally results in salivation, these two variables are called the unconditioned stimulus (UCS) and the unconditioned response (UCR), respectively. The bell and salivation are not naturally occurring; the dog was conditioned to respond to the bell. Therefore, the bell is considered the conditioned stimulus (CS) and the salivation to the bell, the conditioned response (CR).

Many of our behaviors today are shaped by the pairing of stimuli. Have you ever noticed that certain stimuli, such as the smell of a cologne or perfume, a certain song, a specific day of the year, results in fairly intense emotions? It's not that the smell or the song are the cause of the

emotion, but rather what that smell or song has been paired with...perhaps an ex-boyfriend or ex-girlfriend, the death of a loved one, or maybe the day you met your current husband or wife. We make these associations all the time and often don't realize the power that these connections or pairings *have* on us. But, in fact, we have been classically conditioned. Operant Conditioning. Another type of learning, very similar to that discussed above, is called Operant Conditioning. The term "Operant" refers to how an organism operates on the environment, and hence, operant conditioning comes from how we respond to what is presented to us in our environment. It can be thought of as learning due to the natural consequences of our actions.

Let's explain that a little further. The classic study of Operant Conditioning involved a cat who was placed in a box with only one way out; a specific area of the box had to be pressed in order for the door to open. The cat initially tries to get out of the box because freedom is reinforcing. In its attempt to escape, the **area** of the box is triggered and the door opens. The cat is now free. Once placed in the box again, the cat will naturally try to remember what it did to escape the previous time and will once again find the area to press. More the cat is placed back in the box, the quicker it will press that area for its freedom. It has learned, through natural consequences, how to gain the reinforcing freedom.

We learn this way every day in our lives. Imagine the last time you made a mistake; you most likely remember that mistake and do things differently when the situation comes up again. In that sense, you've learned to act differently based on the natural consequences of your previous actions. The same holds true for positive actions. If something you did results in a positive outcome, you are likely to do that same activity again.

The term reinforce means to strengthen, and is used in psychology to refer to anything stimulus which strengthens or increases the probability of a specific response. For example, if you want your dog to sit on command, you may give him a treat every time he sits for you. The dog will eventually come to understand that sitting when told to will result in a treat. This treat is reinforcing because he likes it and will repeat in him sitting when instructed to do so. This is a simple description of a reinforce (Skinner, 1938), the treat, which increases the response, sitting. We all apply reinforce everyday, most of the time without even realizing we are doing it. You may tell your child "good job" after he or she cleans their room; perhaps you tell your partner how good he or she looks when they job up; or maybe you got a raise at work after doing a "great job" on a project. All of these things increase the probability that the same response will be repeated.

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