

OPERANT CONDITIONING: THEORIES ON HOW WE LEARN

Operant Conditioning with Examples

Operant conditioning is an important concept in psychology. Operant conditioning is a learning process that involves an increase or decrease in the likelihood of some behavior as a result of the consequences. There are four types of learning processes in operant conditioning: positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement, positive punishment, and negative punishment.

Definitions of the Types of Operant Conditioning

Positive Reinforcement

Positive reinforcement occurs when the likelihood of a certain behavior increases as a result of the presentation of something pleasant after the behavior.

Negative Reinforcement

Negative reinforcement occurs when the likelihood of a certain behavior increases as the result of removing something unpleasant after the behavior.

Positive Punishment

Positive punishment occurs when the likelihood of a certain behavior decreases as the result of the presentation of something unpleasant after the behavior.

Negative Punishment

Negative punishment occurs when the likelihood of a certain behavior decreases as the result of the removal of something pleasant after the behavior.

Operant Conditioning Examples

Examples of Positive Reinforcement

We may continue to go to work each day because we receive a paycheck on a weekly or monthly basis. If we receive awards for writing short stories, we may be more likely to increase the frequency of writing short stories. Receiving praise for our karaoke performances can increase how often we sing. These are all examples of positive reinforcement.

Example of Negative Reinforcement

Imagine that you decided to open a window in your home. However, you are not happy with the noise from the traffic. Thus, you decide to turn on the radio and listen to music. This makes the traffic noise less noticeable. The frequency in which you turn on the radio when the window is open has increased. This would be an example of negative reinforcement. Turning on the radio has resulted in a decrease in the unpleasantness of the traffic noise.

Example of Positive Punishment

An example of positive punishment is when the negative behavior of an employee decreases as the result of being criticized by a supervisor.

Example of Negative Punishment

An example of negative punishment is when the frequency in which an employee is late for work decreases as a result of losing the right to listen to music while he or she works.

Negative Reinforcement vs. Punishment

It is important to not confuse negative reinforcement and punishment. They are different. Negative reinforcement involves an **increase** in a behavior. In contrast, punishment involves a **decrease** in a behavior.

Drawbacks of Positive Reinforcement

Positive reinforcement may seem to be an ideal technique to increase certain positive behaviors. Managers may be able to motivate employees using positive reinforcement techniques. However, there can be some drawbacks.

1. The use of positive reinforcement techniques may result in people becoming more extrinsically motivated. Extrinsic motivation may undermine creativity. In Amabile's (1985) experiment, people were asked to write two poems. Before writing the second poem, some people were given a questionnaire in which they were asked to rank the importance of some reasons for writing. In one condition, these reflected extrinsic motivation. In another condition, they reflected intrinsic motivation. In the control condition, people did not receive a questionnaire with reasons for writing. The poems in the extrinsic-orientation condition were judged to be less creative, on the average, than the poems in the control condition.

2. The ideal employee may be one who is intrinsically motivated and does not require constant supervision. Intrinsically motivated employees may be less likely to be late. They also may be more likely to excel at their jobs. Thus, positive reinforcement techniques may not lead to ideal employees in a company.

References

Amabile, T. M. (1985). Motivation and creativity: Effects of motivational orientation on creative writers. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 48, 393-399.