

Operant Conditioning ^[1]

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To Reward or to Punish?

Developed by B.F Skinner, operant conditioning is a way of learning by means of rewards and punishments. This type of conditioning holds that a certain behavior and a consequence, either a reward or punishment, have a connection which brings about learning.

Studies on classical conditioning resulted to the emergence of other theories that may explain behavior and learning, and one of these is Operant Conditioning. Operant conditioning tries to negate the belief that internal thoughts and mere motivations would bring about learning a behavior. As a behaviorist, Skinner thought that only external causes of behavior should be considered.

The term "operant" was used by Skinner in order to give us a good overview of his theory. By this term, he meant that this type of conditioning involves only external factors that affect behavior and its consequences.

A. Reinforcement

Reinforcement is a process of increasing the frequency or rate of a behavior by means of presenting a stimulus shortly after the display of behavior. The event that intensifies the likelihood of the behavior to be repeated is called a reinforcer. There are two types of reinforcer:

1. **Positive reinforcers** are favorable stimuli that are given after the display of behavior. Positive reinforcement strengthens the probability of a behavior by means of the addition of something.

Example: You studied hard and got an A in your Math exam. Your mom rewards you by treating you to your favorite restaurant. After this, you study hard again and also got an A in your History exam. Your mom rewards you by going with you to see a movie you like. For your next examinations, you study hard once more.

2. **Negative reinforcers**, on the other hand, is the removal of the unfavorable stimuli after the display of behavior. In negative reinforcement, the behavior or response is intensified by the removal of something.

Example: You leave home at 8 am to drive your way to work, and you always encounter heavy traffic. You leave your home earlier the next day, causing you to avoid the heavy traffic. You leave home earlier than 8am during the next days and you keep on avoiding the heavy traffic. This means that your behavior of leaving home earlier than 8 am is intensified by the consequence of getting to avoid heavy traffic.

In both positive and negative reinforcements, behavior is increased.

B. Punishment

In contrast to reinforcement, punishment is a process wherein a stimulus is presented after the display of behavior and causes the decline in the likelihood of behavior to reoccur. There are two types of punishments:

1. Positive punishment is the addition of something which causes the decrease in repeating the behavior that was displayed. Negative punishment, also known as punishment by removal, occurs when a favorable event or outcome is removed after a behavior occurs.

Example: A child teased his sister, making her cry so loud. The mother spanked him on his buttocks because of this. The child never teased his sister again.

2. Negative Punishment, on the other hand, is the removal of something which is favorable, in order to decrease the likelihood of the behavior to reoccur.

Example: A teenager is caught cheating in an examination. His parents then forbid him to use his car and also reduce his allowance. The teenager does not cheat in his present exams anymore.

To have a better understanding of these concepts, here is a table which summarizes the characteristics of positive /negative reinforcement and positive /negative punishment:

	Decreases likelihood of behavior	Increases likelihood of behavior
Addition	Positive punishment	Positive reinforcement
Removal	Negative punishment	Negative reinforcement

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