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Classical and Operant Conditioning - Behaviorist Theories

3 minutes

Key Concepts

What is the difference between operant conditioning and classical conditioning? In operant conditioning, a voluntary response is then followed by a reinforcing stimulus. In this way, the voluntary response (e.g. studying for an exam) is more likely to be done by the individual. In contrast, classical conditioning is when a stimulus automatically triggers an involuntary response.

Operant Conditioning

Operant conditioning can be described as a process that attempts to modify behavior through the use of positive and negative reinforcement. Through operant conditioning, an individual makes an association between a particular behavior and a consequence^[2].

- Example 1: Parents rewarding a child's excellent grades with candy or some other prize.
- Example 2: A schoolteacher awards points to those students who are the most calm and well-behaved. Students eventually realize that when they voluntarily become quieter and better behaved, that they earn more points.

- Example 3: A form of reinforcement (such as food) is given to an animal every time the animal (for example, a hungry lion) presses a lever^[3].

The term “operant conditioning” originated by the [behaviorist](#) B. F. Skinner, who believed that one should focus on the external, observable causes of behavior (rather than try to unpack the internal thoughts and motivations)

Reinforcement comes in two forms: positive and negative. We will explain this below.

Positive and negative reinforcers

- Positive reinforcers are favorable events or outcomes that are given to the individual after the desired behavior. This may come in the form of praise, rewards, etc.
- Negative reinforcers typically are characterized by the removal of an undesired or unpleasant outcome after the desired behavior. A response is strengthened as something considered negative is removed.

The goal in both of these cases of reinforcement is for the behavior to increase.

Positive and negative punishment

Punishment, in contrast, is when the increase of something undesirable attempts to cause a decrease in the behavior that follows.

- Positive punishment is when unfavorable events or outcomes are given in order to weaken the response that follows.

- Negative punishment is characterized by when an favorable event or outcome is removed after a undesired behavior occurs.

The goal in both of these cases of punishment is for a behavior to decrease.