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Classical, Operant, and Observational Learning

Research of Ivan Pavlov, which is the foundation of a branch of psychology in North America called behaviorism, is what led to discovery of classical conditioning[[1]](#footnote-1). Chapter 7 teaches us that Pavlov first observed the stimulus and response relationship and swiftly concluded that this relationship is an organic one. This is to say it happens automatically and has roots in biological survival instincts of living organisms. The quantitate relationship between action and reaction opened the door to scientific thinking, one that is not easily possible when talking about mind and consciousness in study of psychology. Psychologists have labeled this fundamental relationship between a stimulus and a response as Unconditioned Stimulus (US) and Unconditioned Response (UR). Unconditioned here means unlearned or innate. I have to add that distinguishing between natural and neutral can be a source of confusion in the text copy, but I digress. Next to this relationship is Neutral Stimulus (NS). (NS) is a stimulus that initially has no effect on the subject perhaps because it is meaningless. Pavlov was able to prove that living organisms are capable of learning (being conditioned) to exhibit an unconditional response (UR) when presented with a previously neutral stimulus (NS). This learning or conditioning process happens when (NS) and (US) are presented together and repeatedly. The (NS) should precede (US) to be associated with (UR) and if presented after the fact has no learning consequence.

A website called “training horses naturally[[2]](#footnote-2)” provides an example of classical conditioning via feeding routine of horses. Here the trainer has been able to teach the horses to correlate the screeching sound of the barn door opening (normally meaningless to a horse) with feeding. The unconditioned behavior or response based on biology is for the horse to remember a source of food. Therefore, the (US) is feeding and the (UR) is going to the source of food. The screeching sound of the barn door opening is the (NS), which originally meant nothing to the horses. After repeated occasions of screeching sound of the door accompanying presence of food the learned or conditioned response (CR) is to go to the source of screeching sound. Thus the sound of the barn door has turned from (NS) to a (CS); noticing the screeching noise and going to it is a new and learned behavior.

Operand conditioning is similar to the classical one and could be the bases of concluding that living organisms are self-aware. In this case, the organism, motivated by biology to satisfy a need, learns to present a response (behavior) that elicits a desirable consequence. While reading the text I could not help but to think of LT. Col. Dave Grossman, he is a military consultant and runs a website named killology[[3]](#footnote-3). According to Mr. Grossman, an example of operant conditioning is fighter pilots and their training environment. Flight simulators present the trainees with various audio and visual clues. Motivated by the unlearned urge to survive the pilots condition themselves to do certain things in anticipation of certain results. This behavior can be learned through positive reinforcement as well as negative one. If I do my breathing exercise (push blood to my brain) I will remain conscious. As a pilot repeats these exercises the positive reinforcement takes hold. On the other hand failing to push the throttle brings on the dreaded red light and the loud buzzer indicating that the plane is about to stall, namely negative reinforcement.

Another method of learning we studied in chapter 7 is observational learning. This method allows organisms to learn without personally going through the experience. The book explains how we learn our native language this way. A child learning to speak is completely unaware of grammar and spelling rules and simply mimics the others as a parrot would. When considering the human animal, this copycat system is a double edge sward. Prosaically, humans can empathize with other humans, animals or abstract beings like mother earth. Without having experienced the pain of an injury, or helplessness of abandonment, or anger of being wronged we can mirror those feelings when we see them in others. For the same reason, antisocial aspects of observational learning can be powerful. We can channel the rage of a villain or think a bigoted act as normal if that is all we have to mimic.

My boss at my first professional job, Tim Bucholtz, had this habit of pointing to his nose to indicate that I was on the right path whenever I was reporting on situation to him. I came home and told my wife about this unique behavior. It was a short-term contract that lasted only a few months but years later, still occasionally my wife catches me making the same gesture in a conversation. Especially when I am being extra respectful in the conversation and want to show that, I agree with the point of conversation without interrupting.

Works Cited

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1. Myers, David G. Psychology. 10th ed. New York: Worth Publishers, 2011. Print. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Polny, Elaine. “What is Classical Conditioning?” training-horses-naturally.com. Horses by Nature, 8 May. 2012. Web. 26 May. 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Grossman, Dave. “Trained to kill” Killology.com. Killology Research Group, 2000. Web. 26 May. 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)