



A Review of B. F. Skinner's 'Reinforcement Theory of Motivation'

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Abstract

B. F. Skinner in his book *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* said that thinkers should make fundamental changes in human behavior, and they couldn't bring these changes only with the help of physics or biology. He believes that we only acquire the technology of behavior. Centuries ago people were seeing themselves as a person who could feel himself better any other creatures in the world. But in today's world he is not able to understand himself. Although science have emerged vastly; but we are not able to compare anything like a science of human behavior with any other science in the world. As behaviorist B.F. Skinner brought up the Reinforcement Theory. The Reinforcement Theory is one of the oldest theories of motivation which describe behavior and how we act. This theory can called as 'behaviorism' or 'operant conditioning' that is taught in the today's world of psychology. In this article we are looking at B. F. Skinner Reinforcement Theory of Motivation and we go through all details in this theory. This is a review paper based on the theorist Skinner.

Keywords: Technology of Behavior, Reinforcement theory, motivation, psychology, operant conditioning.



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1. Introduction

Motivation is the concept we apply when “describe the forces acting on or within an organism to initiate and direct behavior”. We also use the term motivation to explain differences in the course of the behavior. More intense behaviors consider being the outcome of higher levels of motivation. Moreover, we often apply the concept of motivation to show and highlight the direction of behavior (Petri 1981).

As behaviorist B.F. Skinner brought up the Reinforcement Theory. The Reinforcement Theory is one of the oldest theories of motivation which describe behavior and how we act. This theory can be called as ‘behaviorism’ or ‘operant conditioning’ that is taught in the today’s world of psychology. This theory is all about: “an individual’s behavior is a function of its consequences” (Management Study Guide 2013). In the world of psychologists which regarded along with modern time might be undesirable to the individuals who go over Skinner’s ideas. Since psychology always looked into people’s psyche and to bring awareness for each individual Skinner also highlighted this theory from different angles. After understanding Skinner’s ideas, different institutions like: business, governmental, educational, even mental hospitals are able to acquire a vast knowledge of human behavior. “In understanding why any organism behaves the way it does, Skinner saw no place for dwelling on a person’s intentions or goals” (Banaji, 2011). Skinner concerned about human behavior and his environment which he is living. He contributes to psychological science in the concept of reinforcement.

Motivation as a Concept:

In short Motivation means :

“The individual forces that account for the direction, level, and persistence of a person’s effort expended at work”.

Features of Motivation:

Kleinginna (1981), as an example has collected different definitions and criticism statements regarding motivation from different texts about this concept which is a little bit different in some definitions, but mostly following the same features of motivation in all the contexts.

Activation:

The activating property of motivation, or activation, is most easily seen in the production of behavior. Though motivation is considered to be behaviorally activating, the behavior activated may not always be overt. Fortunately, for many motivational states, changes in motivation do lead to changes in overt behavior.

Persistence:

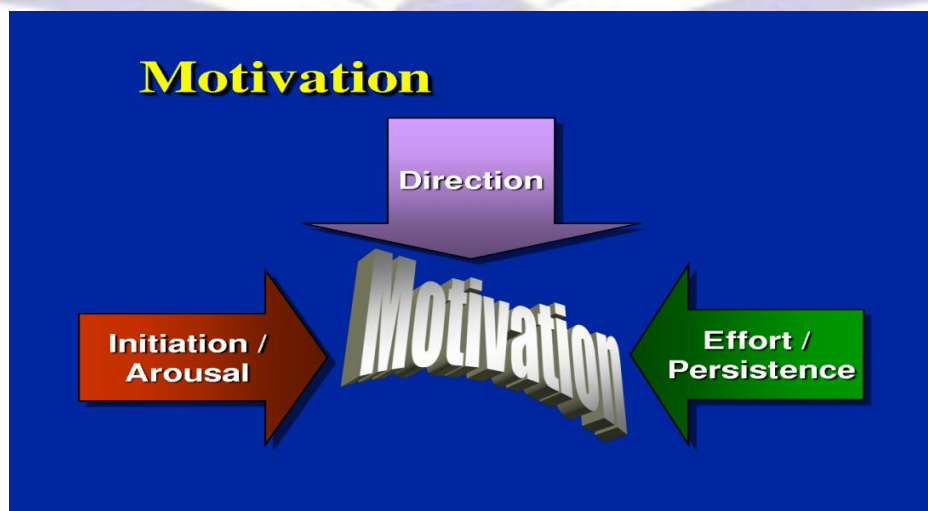
Hungry animals persist in their attempts to get food. Similarly, humans often persist in behaving in particular ways even when the chances of success are vanishing small. Observation of this continued persistence had led many psychologists to regard it as an index of motivation.

Direction:

How do we decide to direct our behavior in one way rather than another? The specific way in which the directionality is achieved is debated by theorists, many psychologists have argued that motivation is involved. Directionality, then, is often considered an index of motivational state (Petri).

Motives and Motivation:

The term Motive applied in different contexts in a simple and clear language. (Peters 1969). In different meanings Motives, are “a particular class of reasons, which are distinguished by certain logical properties” (Peters 1969).





2. Method

About the Reinforcement Theory :

Reinforcement theory describes specifically how people learn behavior and learn how to act. Also different instructors who attempt to bring motivation for the students should make sure that these teachers will not give reward to all students at the same time. They should say to the students who are not acting well in the course of learning and they are not leading a correct way in this process. Teachers basically should bring awareness to the students and teach them in what they are able to gain positive reinforcement.

Reinforcement , “is a term in operant conditioning and Behavior analysis for process of increasing the rate or probability of a behavior in the form of response by delivery either immediately or shortly after performing the behavior”.

Reinforcement theory of motivation highlights the state of mind of each person, that is; his emotion and feeling. Reinforcement theory concentrates generally on changes which occur in each person when he or she goes through in the course of some actions or acting some behavior. So, based on Skinner: “the external environment of the organization must be designed effectively and positively so as to motivate the employee”. Reinforcement theory of Motivation is a powerful way to control the process of action and behavior in each person. This theory doesn't look at the reason for people's behavior.

Is the short reinforcement theory of motivation looks at the state of mind of each person. Reinforcement theory of motivation concentrates on:



Reinforcement theory applied in different studies such as: training of animals, growing up the child, also to motivate employees. This theory highlights some features which help the person to shape his own behavior and action. In short, reinforcement theory states that stimuli can contribute for shaping behaviors. Reinforcement theory includes four approaches, these approaches are:

- ✓ Positive reinforcement
- ✓ Negative reinforcement
- ✓ Extinction
- ✓ Punishment

3. Analysis

Positive reinforcement:

Is a student works well, do so much hard work and do some enthusiasm in his studies the teachers will give a reward to encourage and motivate him . This also can apply to employee who is leading his work well. As an example, In the class the student brings a good mark so he or she will be awarded by the teacher. In this way they can motivate other students and have some benefits for the whole class. So this positive reinforcement means that if someone gives a positive response to something or do some positive action he or she should be rewarded positively. As an example if the teacher praise the students for entering the class on time this one will have a positive effect on all the students which are sitting in the class and witnessing this behavior. Also means to adding of repetitive stimulus to increase a certain behavior or response . Another example if the boss gives reward for the employee who is making progress and acting well in the workplace so if he is faced with better performance this reward will be increase more and more so this is a positive reinforcement for each employee in the workplace. There are different types of positive reinforcement . These are such as :

- ✓ ATTENTION : a teacher can show his or her attention by:
 - A Smile
 - Pat on back standing
 - To sit near the student
 - Consider positive Points for the student
 - To spend some activities with the student
 - To give student different choices
 - Don't criticize the student
 - To concentrate on their positive behavior

Negative reinforcement:

As I explained how a positive reinforcement can happen in the context of class at a workplace a negative reinforcement also can happen in contrast. Both positive and negative reinforcement is able to increase an accepted and positive behavior. For example when a student comes late in class and after that the instructor won't let him in the classroom , in



this case it is a negative reinforcement for other students. Negative reinforcement sometimes, wrongly considered as a punishment. Punishment is: “ the application of aversive stimuli in order to reduce the chance of being a behavior repeated”. Negative reinforcement is: “ the removal of aversive stimuli in order to increase the probability of being a behavior repeated”.

Negative reinforcement is able to have positive effects on the behavior of others, like for creating a classroom that is safe for all the learners.

Punishment reinforcement

Punishment happens when an individual brings some harm to the organization and he or she did something wrong so in this case the boss or the teachers can punish the student or the employee. As an example, when in a company an employee's cause some loss for the company the company can reduce his salary or reduce his wages. Because he has made a big mistake and after that no one can make it right. The word punishment is, “usually confined to contingencies intentionally arranged by other people, who arrange them because the results are reinforcing to them. A person resorts to punishment when he criticizes, ridicules, Blames, or physically attacks another in order to suppress unwanted behavior” (Skinner 1972).

In short, Punishment is: “ designed to remove awkward, dangerous, or otherwise unwanted behavior from a repertoire on the assumption that a person who has been punished is less likely to behave in the same way again”.

It means to apply awkward outcomes to show awkward behaviors. As an example for a student who is breaking the rules of the school punishment can apply to him.

Negative reinforcement and punishment most of the times are confusing for the reader. In this way I have brought some differences which differentiate negative reinforcement from punishment . Basically these two concepts are confusing .

The first difference between punishment and negative reinforcement is that: “Punishment reduces the probability of an undesired behavior”. And “Negative reinforcement increase the probability of a desired behavior”.

The second one is that: “ Punishment involves administering a negative consequence when an undesired behavior occurs”. And “Negative reinforcement entails removing a negative consequence when a desired behavior occurs”.

Negative Punishment:

“Negative punishment involves removing a pleasant stimulus *other than* the one maintaining the behavior in order to decrease the frequency of the behavior.” (M. Sundel & S. Sundel, 2005). I want to bring an example regarding this negative punishment I can say it can an employee in the workplace who is talking about unrelated matters to the other employees in the workplace and distracting them from working properly. So in this context other employees will ask him politely which be aware of his behavior. So the manager tells him that because he is distracting others and he continues with his behavior his wages will be reduces. Next way of negative punishment is that the manager order to remove his place and his desk and take it to some place with no other employee in an isolated room. So this reducing his wages and moving his desk to another place are some examples which considers and negative punishment. (M. Sundel & S. Sundel, 2005). Based on D. Hockenbury and S. Hockenbury (2010), negative punishment can also be named as 'punishment of removal'.

In negative punishment the person who tries to punish should consider some point:

Acting rapidly:

According to Robbins, Odendal and Roodt, acting rapidly means: “The closer the disciplinary action is to the actual offense, the more likely it is that the employee will associate the punishment with the offense or unwanted behavior and not the dispenser of the punishment” (Robbins, Odendaal, & Roodt, 2009).

Being regular:

Based on Robbins the punishment should be consistent from the manager side of the employee and in each individual as well. For example in the context of classroom if each student is coming late for the class he or she should be punished each time which she is coming late for the class and this punishment should happen regularly until she quit this awkward behavior. N any case if the teacher cannot punish the student consistently, his rules won't have the same effect and impact and the student may wonder or question the way the teachers punish him . (Robbins et al., 2009).

Based on Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer and Vohs (2001), “because bad interactions are more powerful emotionally than good interactions, it is important to balance the good and bad by more frequently using positive reinforcement rather than punishment. A good ratio is five enjoyable interactions to one disagreeable interaction” (Baumeister et al., 2001). The teacher should punish in private and admire in public. Private punishments are much better than public punishments. In public punishments the student may be embarrassed and it can cause negative impacts on the student (Hellriegel & Slocum Jr., 2007).

Negative Punishments:

It is very important to one who want to punish a person. A punishment should be effective. So I have listed four dangers of punishment:



Punishment activates feelings:

The person who is in charge of punishing someone should be more excited and satisfied rather than acting aggressive. This means that although he or she may be excited but should be careful of acting aggressively in front of the person who is going to be punished. These pointers may act blindly and they may lose their control over their behavior and when they will realize that it is already lost. So a person shouldn't abuse his or her place as a Punisher. In this case they can rise so much of hatred and sense of humiliation for the person who is punished. Are different cases the persons who went through severe punishments cannot concentrate on the studies and they cannot learn anything because they always remember the pain which they have got from punishment.

To repeat punishing can be challenging:

Since Punisher's mood keeps changing with different situations so to punish effectively is very hard. Inconsistency and repetition in punishment cannot be effective anymore. All punishments for all the students or employees should be equal to punish someone in one way and the other in different way can bring a different outcome especially for those who are in the same workplace or in the same class.

Judging the degree of severity is difficult:

A person who is punished can have different ideas, thoughts and Perceptions from a person who is punishing him. As an example when a student is punished by a teacher he or she can feel much more humiliated beyond what the teacher may actually feel. Some circumstances can bring a feeling for revenge from the Punisher or psychological crises for the person who is punished.

Punishment may bring concealment for the punished:

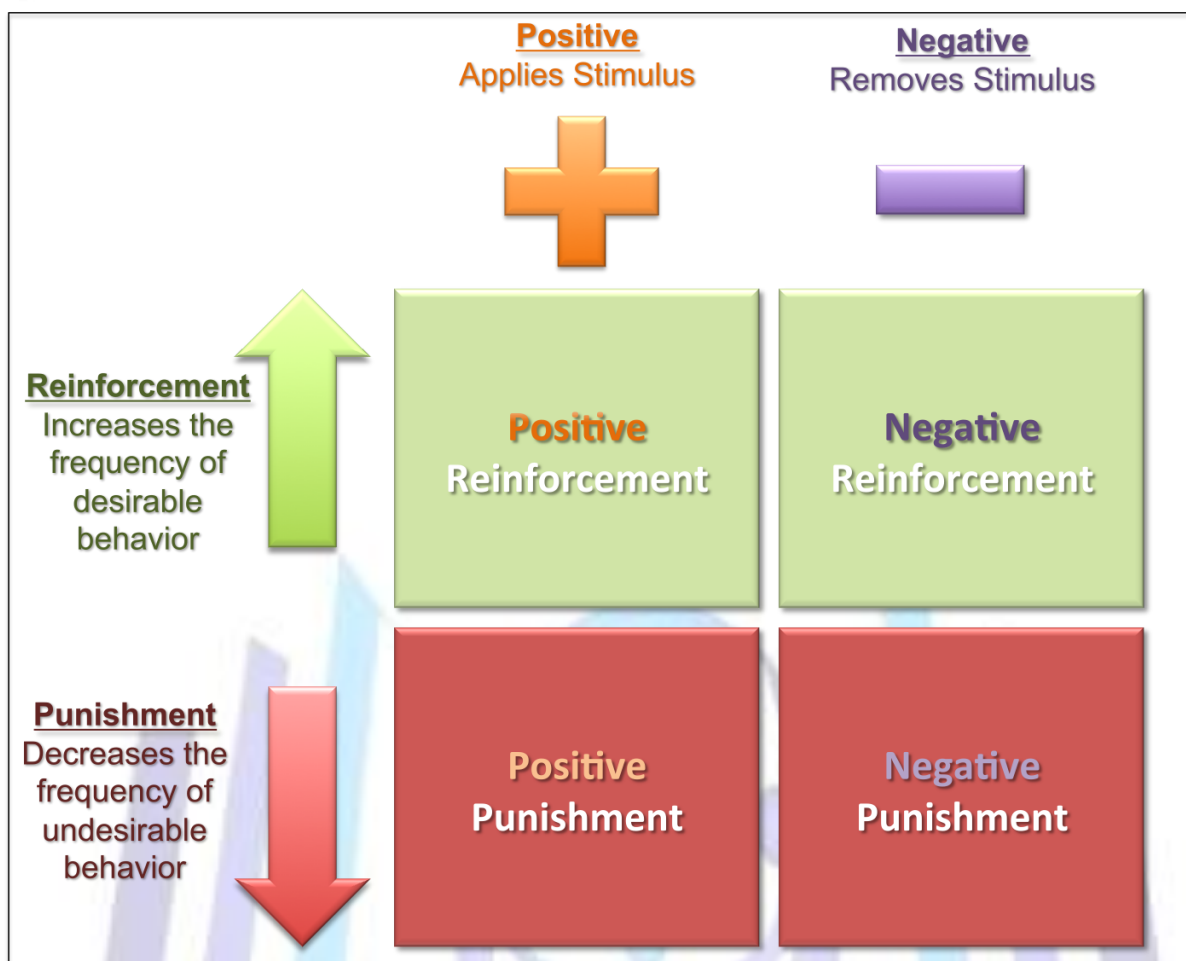
Specifically in a classroom when the teacher applies punishment repeatedly to the students. Students mostly withdraw, and remain quiet and they have not communicated with cuter because they don't want to be punished more unnecessary. Based on Booth-Butterfield (1996), for an effective punishment, the punishment should be:

- ✓ Immediate.
- ✓ Intense.
- ✓ Unavoidable.
- ✓ Consistent

Extinction reinforcement

Extinction means, "absence of reinforcements". In short it means, "lowering the probability of undesired behavior by removing the reward for that kind of behavior". As an example in the workplace is an employer repeatedly doing positive actions toward raising the level of the company but from other hand he won't see any reward so he will lose his desire of doing his work. This one also goes to the context of the classroom and for the students.

Similarly while the employee is not able to help the organization, and from other side cause some loss he will be considered as extinct.



So in this table we are able to see that positive and negative reinforcement and positive and negative punishment and increase and decrease the frequency of desired behavior of the person. If the positive and negative reinforcement is increasing also there is an increase in the frequency of desirable behavior. Similarly is positive and negative punishment is decreasing there is a decrease in the frequency of undesirable behavior.

4. Discussion and Implication

Different types of reinforcement:

- ✓ Social Reinforcement
- ✓ Token Reinforcement
- ✓ Tangible Reinforcement
- ✓ Activity Reinforcers

Social Reinforcement:

Social reinforcement is always considered as an effective reinforcement for the students or employees. For example when a manager or a teacher smile to their clients or students this action has a very positive effect on them. When they have a positive impact on them by using some words like thank you very much or well done. These are example of social reinforcement. So when they admire and praise the action which has done they are communicating socially with each other and it has a very positive impact on them.

Token Reinforcement:

As we can understand from the name token reinforcement are those stars tokens and cards which are given to the students for their positive behavior. For example a token like a card can be given to a student who studied well in one special exam and got the highest point. This act also encourages other students who be more enthusiastic and study more effectively.

Tangible Reinforcement:

Tangibles which are considered small gifts which are handled to the person for his good behavior or his good action and attitude. Tangibles can be certificates which had written their name on it.



Activity Reinforcers:

Activity reinforcers are those activities which will be given to the person as a reward and gift, or example a ticket for a swimming pool can be given to a person who is working in an office for his positive behavior. For student this activity reinforcement can be played on the ground for the teacher or playing computer games. There are different types of activities like going for a short trip with all the students in the class. It depends on the class and the students that which activity suits them more. So this kind of activity is a positive activity which can bring enjoyment along itself (Wagner 2010).

Choosing a reinforcement:

As you saw there are different kinds of reinforcement which can be suitable for a group and useless for the other groups. So for choosing the best reinforcer for a class or a group of people as well as a person reinforcer should have different values and individualistic features. There are some points which can help a person who wants to choose the best reinforcer. These points are as follows:

- ✓ **Observing:**
For observing the student one should make sure which kind of activities they like and which kind of reinforcer matching his behavior.
- ✓ **Asking:**
For realizing their interest one can ask and bring for them different choices and make them choose among these possible choices.
- ✓ **Monitoring:**
After choosing the specific reinforcer now the teacher or the person who in charge should make sure that this reinforcer is suitable for them or another reinforce should apply to them.
- ✓ **Evaluating:**
Do a formal preference assessment.

Delivery of the reinforcement:

For making positive reinforcement, an effective intervention can apply based on guidelines bellow:

- ✓ The reinforcement needs to be repeatedly delivered, based on a planned reinforcement program.
- ✓ The reinforcement should deliver quickly to the students to keep it from losing its effect. And if there is any need should use verbal reinforcement to the students to tell him or her when he or she need another reinforcement.
- ✓ If reinforce improves the teacher shouldn't wait for a perfect student for that specific reinforce. Whenever the teacher sees the improvement he or she should encourage the students and don't wait for a perfect student and perfect behavior.
- ✓ The teacher shouldn't use reinforcer when he or she is feeling sorry for the student. If a student can not show improvement you should give him another chance for trying next time.
- ✓ As much as you can use social reinforcement match to your other reinforcement activities. And use verbal reinforcements. You should be able to thank someone easily and encouraging their abilities if also they are not perfect enough.
- ✓ There shouldn't be any ambiguity in your social reinforcements. Everything should be clear and understandable for the students (Wagner 2010).
- ✓ Each reinforcement should be appropriate for the person's age. You cannot expect a school boy to change his behavior by giving him gifts. This one is not effective enough. So any small change can get an award and admiration.

5. Organization of Ideas

Reinforcement Theory 's Strengths and Weaknesses:

As a conclusion we shall mention the strength and weaknesses of this theory:

Strengths or Positive Points:

- ✓ **Find how to motivate**

As we know Theory of motivation concentrates on internal needs and Reinforcement Theory focuses on external conditions and situations. Thus, this is much more easier for motivating a worker in the workplace by external factors like giving promotions or increasing the wages (Operant Conditioning, 2006).

- ✓ **Involve employees**

To conduct some tests or performance for the students or employees. So in this way they always should be ready for the test and they should work properly with the highest potential (Redmond, 2010).

Weaknesses or Negative Points:

- ✓ **Difficulty in identifying rewards or punishments**



All people are not the same like each other and they have different abilities. A reinforcement which is very effective on some people may not be effective on others and shows a reverse effect and act poorly.

✓ **Hard to apply to complicated forms of behavior**

All behaviors are not the same in the same situations or different situations so it's very hard to apply a reinforcement to a situation. So using the same reinforcement in the same station for different people can not be effective.

✓ **Imposes on free will**

It's unethical if one who gives gifts and reward for changing behavior . This goes also for those who are trying to control a person or a group of people by imposing reward (Redmond, 2010).

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