

ACTIVITY **23**

OPERANT CONDITIONING: ROLE IN HUMAN BEHAVIOR

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Concept

From infancy onward, conditioning plays a major role in our lives. Yet most of us tend to downplay that role, possibly feeling that to admit such control over our behavior would be to admit that our lives are overly determined. Often when students read in their texts about classical and operant conditioning, they tend to associate that type of learning with infrahuman animals. That is, "Dogs, rats, and pigeons are affected by conditioning, but it doesn't play any role in my behavior." This activity is designed to provide a starting point for discussion of conditioning in humans.

Instructions

While discussing operant conditioning, interrupt your lecture with "Oh, by the way, before I forget again" and then ask a question to which you know you will get either an almost totally positive or negative response. For example, if your students are primarily seniors, you might say, "I was supposed to ask, how many of you have signed for a diploma for graduation?" All students will usually raise a hand. Then tell them to hold the position they are in and ask if anyone told them to raise their hands or even mentioned raising hands.

Discussion

The usual response is a chorus of groans as the students recognize that they have been "used." Discuss the activity as an example of human conditioning. Ask students to generate other examples that describe conditioning in humans. You can use the ensuing discussion as a bridge to talking about conditioning techniques used with humans in behavior therapy.

Suggested Background Readings

- Bellack, A. S., & Hersen, M. *Behavior modification: An introductory textbook*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- Hulse, S. H., Deese, J. E., & Smith, H. E. *The psychology of learning* (5th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980.
- Smith, W. I. *Conditioning and instrumental learning* (2nd ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978.