Classical, Operant, And Observational Conditioning Essay, Research Paper

Classical, operant, and observational are all types of conditioning

and learning. Conditioning, in psychology, is causing an organism to

exhibit a specific response to a stimulus. A stimulus is anything that

heightens excitement or action.

Classical conditioning is a form of learning, in which a reflexive or

automatic response transfers from one stimulus to another. For instance,

a person who has had painful experiences at the dentist?s office may

become fearful at just the sight of the dentist?s office building. Fear, a

natural response to a painful stimulus, has transferred to a different

stimulus, the sight of a building. Most psychologists believe that classical

conditioning occurs when a person forms a mental association between two

stimuli, so that encountering one stimulus makes the person think of the other.

People tend to form these mental associations between events or stimuli that

occur closely together in space or time.

Classical conditioning was discovered by accident by Russian

physiologist Ivan Pavlov. Pavlov was studying how saliva aids the digestive

process. He would give a dog some food and measure the amount of saliva

the dog produced while it ate the meal. After the dog had gone through this

procedure a few times, however, it would begin to salivate before receiving

any food. Pavlov believed that someme new stimulus, had become

associated with the food and produced the response of salivation in the dog.

After an animal has learned a conditioned response to one stimulus, it may

also respond to similar stimuli without training. If a child is bitten by a large

black dog, the child may fear not only that dog, but other large dogs. This is

called generalization. Less similar stimuli will usually produce less

generalization.

After studying classical conditioning in dogs and other animals,

psychologists became interested in how this type of learning might apply to

human behavior. American psychologist John B. Watson conditioned a baby

named Albert to fear a small white rat by pairing the sight of the rat with a loud

noise. Although their experiment was ethically questionable, it showed for the

first time that humans can learn to fear seemingly unimportant stimuli when the

stimuli are associated with unpleasant experiences. Psychologists now know

that classical conditioning explains many emotional responses?such as

happiness, excitement, anger, and anxiety?that people have to specific stimuli.

One of the most widespread and important types of learning is operant

conditioning, which involves increasing a behavior by following it with a

reward, or decreasing a behavior by following it with punishment. operant

conditioning refers to the fact that the learner must operate, or perform a

certain behavior, before receiving a reward or punishment. For example, if a

mother starts giving a boy his favorite snack every day that he cleans up his

room, before long the boy may spend some time each day cleaning his room

in anticipation of the snack. In this example, the boy?s behavior increases

because it is followed by a reward or reinforcer. Positive reinforcement, is a

method of strengthening behavior by following it with a pleasant stimulus.

Positive reinforcement is a powerful method for controlling the behavior of

both animals and people. Negative reinforcement is a method of

strengthening a behavior by following it with the removal of an unpleasant

stimulus.

Some of the earliest scientific research on operant conditioning was

conducted by American psychologist Edward L. Thorndike. Thorndike?s

research subjects included cats, dogs, and chickens. To see how animals learn

new behaviors, Thorndike used a small chamber that he called a puzzle box.

He would place an animal in the puzzle box, and if it performed the correct

behavior the door would swing open and the animal would be rewarded with

some food located just outside the cage. Thorndike developed a principle he

called the law of effect.

Although classical and operant conditioning are important types of

learning, people learn a large portion of what they know through observation.

Learning by observation differs from classical and operant conditioning

because it does not require direct personal experience with stimuli, reinforcers,

or punishers. Learning by observation involves simply watching the behavior of

another person, called a model, and later imitating the model?s behavior.

Both children and adults learn a great deal through observation and imitation.

Young children learn language, social skills, habits, fears, and many other

everyday behaviors by observing their parents and older children. Many

people learn academic, athletic, and musical skills by observing and then

imitating a teacher.

With these three very important types of learning we can teach

both humans and animals new skills. Teaching animals to do silly tasks

that a human can perform is very possible. For instance teaching a

chimpanzee to dance modern rock.