

Level: Master 01
Course of Psycho-Pedagogy
Dr. Kebbout H.

Lecture Three: Behaviorism

Over the past century, educational psychologists and researchers have posited many theories to explain how individuals acquire, organize and deploy skills and knowledge.

Behaviorism is one of the approaches of psychology; it is concerned with the role of learning and human behaviors. This perspective on learning focuses on changes in individuals' observable behavior (changes in what people say or do). The first time that I drove a car, for example, I was concerned primarily with whether I could actually do the driving (behavior), not with whether I could describe or explain how to drive (mental process: thinking).

This theory of learning has dominated a half of the twentieth century and its principles and techniques are still applied to help humans learn new skills and behaviors. Behaviorists rely primarily on two basic images or models of behavioral learning, called respondent (or classical) conditioning and operant conditioning. To say it differently, they claimed that the learner acquire the behavior through conditioning.

Respondent conditioning: learning new associations with prior behaviors

Respondent conditioning begins with the involuntary responses to particular sights, sounds, or other sensations. When I receive an injection from a nurse or a doctor, for example, I cringe, tighten my muscles, and even I perspire a bit. This response is automatic in both humans as well as animals.

Involuntary stimuli and responses were first studied by systematically early in the twentieth-century by the Russian scientist Ivan Pavlov (1927). His most well-known work did not involve humans, but dogs, and specially their involuntary tendency to salivate when eating.

Classical conditioning of the dog: Before conditioning the dog salivates only to the taste of food and the bell has no effect. After conditioning, the dog salivates even when the bell is presented by itself.

Abdelhafid Boussouf University Center, Mila
Institute of Letters and Languages
Department of Foreign Languages
English Section

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Psychologists named the process respondent conditioning because it describes changes in responses to stimuli; it has been called “classical conditioning” because it was historically the first form of behavioral learning to be studied systematically.

Operant conditioning: new behaviors because of new consequences

Operant conditioning focuses on the effects of consequences on behaviors. The operant model of learning begins with the idea that certain consequences tend to make certain behaviors happen more frequently. If I compliment a student for a good comment during a discussion, there is more of a chance that I will hear comments from the student more often in the future. If a student tells a joke to several classmates and they laugh at it, then the student is more likely to tell additional jokes in the future and so on.

The original research about this model of learning was done with animals too. One of the pioneers was B.F. Skinner; he observed the behavior of laboratory rats by putting them in a cage that contained a lever and a small tray just big enough to hold a small amount of food. At first, the rat would sniff the cage at random, but sooner or later it would happen upon the lever and eventually happen to press it. The lever released a small pellet of food, which the rat would eat. Gradually, the rat would spend more time near the lever and press it more frequently, getting food more frequently. Eventually, it would spend most of its time at the lever and eating its fill of food. The rat had discovered that the consequence of pressing the lever was to receive food. Skinner called the changes in the rat’s behavior an example of **operant conditioning**, and gave special names to the different parts of the process. He called the food pellets **the reinforcement** and the lever-pressing **the operant** (because it “operated” on the rat’s environment)

All in all, behaviorism in its focus on the observable behavior neglects the role of the learners to create their worlds and the importance of mental processes in the learning process. In addition, this approach relies on experiments conducted on animals more than human beings