How Behaviour is Learned

Theoretical Perspectives

Behaviourists

Behaviourists Theories

"Psychology as the behaviourist views it ……. The theoretical goal is the prediction and control of behaviour"

Watson, J
(www.pbs.org/wgbh/aso/databank/entries/dh13wa.html)

Key Concepts

- Seeks scientific explanations for simple behaviours – regards any physical action as 'behaviour'.
- Learning is a change of behaviour – what goes in affects what comes out.
- Learning is an active process.
- Learning is a process of stimulus, response and reinforcement.

(Ridall-Leech and Pound, 2010)

Behaviourist Theorists

- Classical Conditioning
- Operant Conditioning

Ivan Pavlov (1849 - 1936)

John Watson (1878 1958)

E. Thorndike (1874 -1949)

B. F. Skinner (1904 -1990)

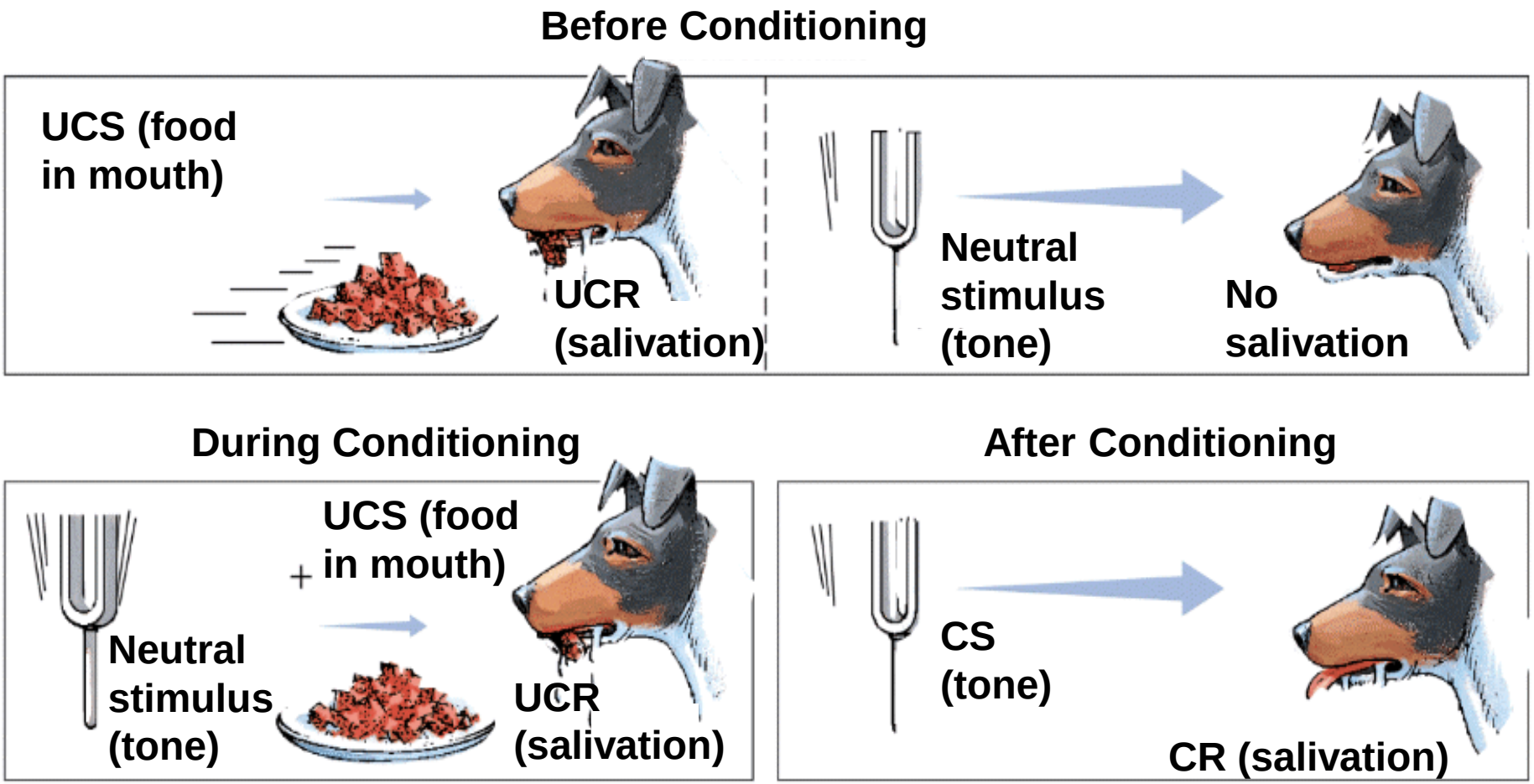
- Punishment
- Reinforcement
- Extinction
- Shaping

Classical Conditioning

- Pavlov carried out experiments on dogs.
- He noticed that dogs naturally salivate to food.
- He called this an unconditional reflex.
- An involuntary action.
- This reflex has its origins in the evolution of the species.

- Watson, Pavlov - Respondent behaviour: elicited by specific observable stimulus

Pavlov's Classic Experiment



Classical Conditioning

- Pavlov trained the dogs to salivate (**conditional response)** in response to the sound of a tuning fork **(conditional stimulus)**, which was reliably sounded a few seconds before food appeared.
- A voluntary action.
- This showed that an individual can carry out an action based on its experiences.

Pavlov's Theory

- Pavlov believed that children/young people can learn by association.
- *When Richard was in hospital he learnt that doctors in white coats caused him pain. When he came home he would not go into the butcher's shop without crying unless the butcher removed his white coat.*
- He associated the white coat with pain.

B.F. Skinner's Theory (1904 – 1990)

"All we need to know in order to describe and explain behavior is this: actions followed by good outcomes are likely to recur, and actions followed by bad outcomes are less likely to recur."
(Skinner, 1953)

Operant Conditioning

- Skinner did extensive work to show how a particular stimulus would become associated with a particular response.
- Skinner claimed that 'behaviour is shaped and maintained by its consequences'.
- He believed everything we do is shaped by our experience of punishment and reward.
- What happens after a particular behaviour will determine whether it will be repeated **(strengthened)** or will stop **(weakened).**

Central Human Motive in Skinner's Theory

Environmental consequences shape behaviour.

Operant conditioning

Skinner introduced the following terms:

- **Reinforcement** – anything which is likely to bring about a repetition of a behaviour pattern – can be pleasant or the removal of something unpleasant.
- **Positive reinforcement** – consequences which are pleasant and which bring about a repetition of behaviour e.g. praise, reward, or pat on the back.
- **Negative reinforcement** – behaviour is repeated in order to escape an unpleasant consequence – something rewarding when stopped.

Operant conditioning

The behaviourist theories are based on the principle that:

Child or young person shows wanted behaviour

↓

Behaviour is rewarded by a pleasant experience

↓

Wanted behaviour is likely to be repeated in the future

Law of Effect

Behaviour → Better state of affairs → Increased probability of behaviour occurring again

Behaviour → Worse state of affairs → Decreased probability of behaviour occurring again

Skinner's theory of operant conditioning

Skinner believed that:

- positive reinforcement will encourage a child or young person to repeat a specific behaviour.
- a child or young person's behaviour can be shaped by rewarding progressive achievements.

Positive Reinforcement

Adam (4 years 7 months) gains positive reinforcement from the adult smiling and praising his efforts.

(Ridall-Leech and Pound,2010)

Thorndike's theories of operant conditioning

Thorndike believed that if a child received a response to an action, and that response provided a pleasant feeling, the child would be more likely to repeat the action that produced the pleasant response.

Punishment

- Reduces the likelihood of behaviour being repeated because it is unpleasant or something pleasant that is removed.
- Punishment has limited value in humans.
- Punishment does not teach appropriate behaviours.
- Must be delivered immediately & consistently.
- Punishment is the process by which behaviour is weakened.

Punishment

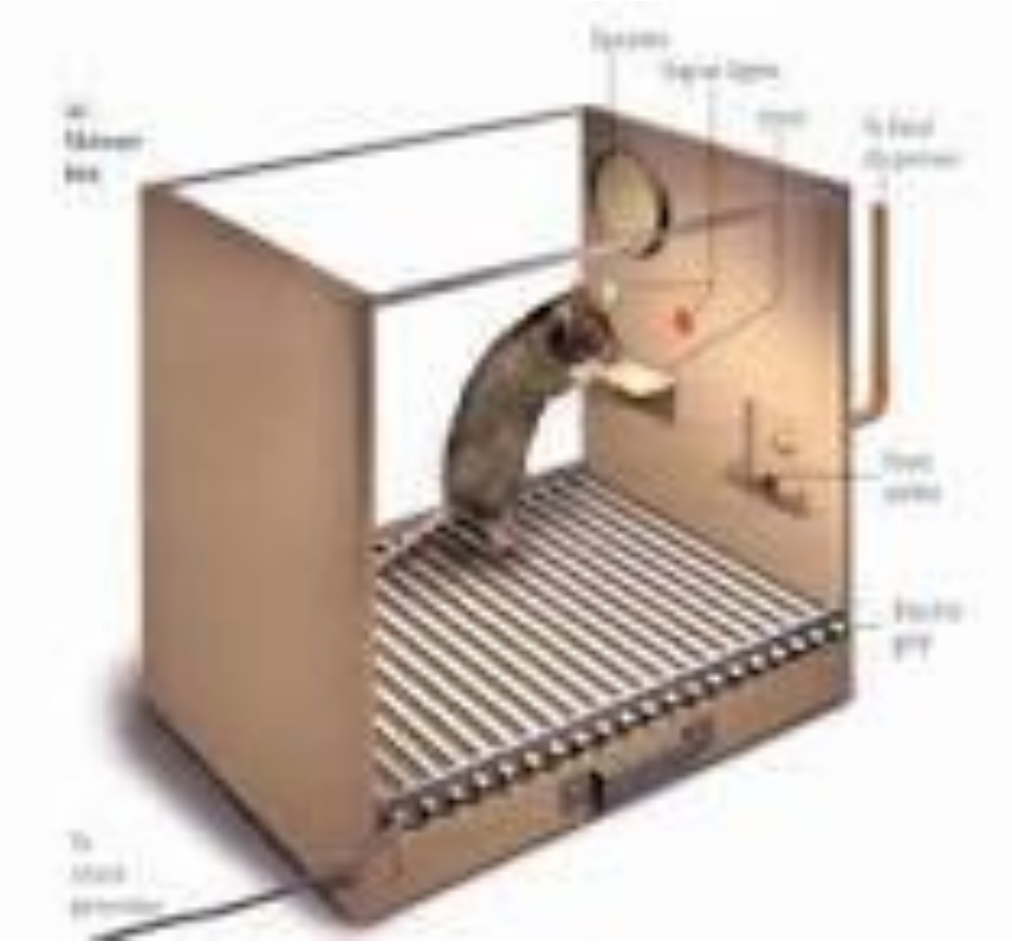
Skinner noted that punishment:

- Suppresses behaviour, but does not necessarily weaken it.
- The behaviour sometimes reappears when the punishment is removed.
- Shows a child or young person what is not wanted but not what to do instead.
- May result in negative side effects.

Punishment

- Can harm the relationship between the child or young person and the adult.
- May create fear, anger, dislike in the child or young person which may encourage the child or young person to show other forms of undesirable behaviour.
- Punishment by an adult provides a model of behaviour which the child or young person might imitate.
- Undesirable behaviours may be learned through modeling (aggression)
- May create negative emotions (anxiety & fear)

Behaviourist Theory in Practice with Children



Using the behaviourist theory with children or young people

- The behaviourist theories are used by most settings and childcare, education and youth work professionals to manage children and young people's behaviour.
- Rewards for positive behaviour are called positive reinforcers.
- The timing of the positive reinforcement is vital.
- Children or young people should be rewarded as soon as possible following the wanted behaviour.
- Behaviour which is rewarded is likely to be repeated.

Using the behaviourist theory with children

- Children or young people who are praised frequently but not all the time will continue to show the wanted behaviour.
- Behaviour that is not reinforced will often disappear.
- If a child or young person shows unwanted behaviour and this is ignored the child or young person may stop the unwanted behaviour if no attention is given.
- Distracting a younger child with another toy or activity can also change a child's behaviour.

Social Learning Theory

Albert Bandura 1925 –

Social Learning Theory

- Bandura carried out famous experiments into modelling using Bobo dolls.
- In one experiment Bandura showed a video to children.
- In the video children saw an adult beat up a doll and call it names etc.
- Bandura divided the children into three groups.

Social Learning Theory

Each group watched a video with different endings:

- 1 adult being rewarded for his behaviour
- 2 adult being punished for his behaviour
- 3 showed no consequences for the behaviour

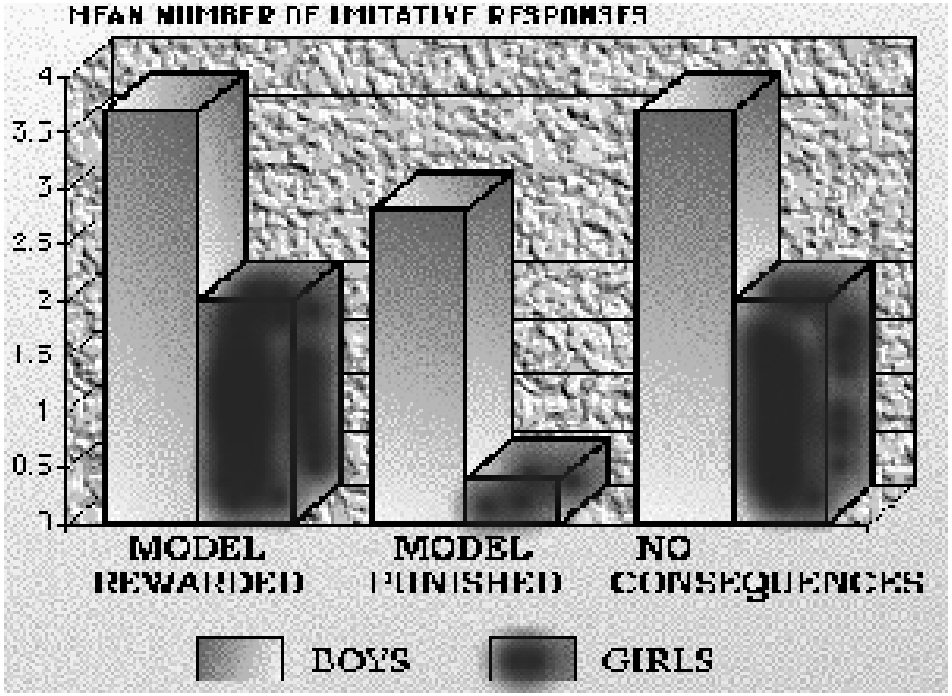
The Bobo Doll Experiment

- Video Presentation

Social Learning Theory

He studied the difference between how males and females reacted

The graph shows the results of how the children copied the behaviour seen



Social Learning Theory

- The results show that in all cases more males copied the behaviour seen in the video than females.
- In the group of children who watched the video where the adult was punished less children copied the behaviour of the adult.
- This supported Bandura's theory that people learn from observing others.

Bandura's Social Learning Theory

Bandura believed:

- children and young people will observe and copy the actions of others.
- a child or young person is more likely to copy the actions of someone he or she values and respects.
- a child or young person's response will be affected by whether the behaviour is rewarded or punished.

Using the Social Learning Theory with Children

- Children need to see people showing desirable behaviour – saying please and thank you.
- Children copy desirable behaviour – cooperating with or assisting others, taking turns etc.
- Adults need to act as a good role model for children and young people at all times.

Using the Social Learning Theory with Children and Young People

- Practitioners need to work in partnership with parents to manage children and young people's behaviour.

- Children and young people need consistent boundaries when learning how to behave.

Using the Social Learning Theory with Children and Young People

- Poor role models affect children and young people's behaviour.
- Children or young people may copy aggressive behaviour if they experience an aggressive parenting style.
- As younger children get older they copy other children or young people and may start to spit or swear, get involved in anti-social behaviour, crime or substance misuse.

Other Theories

Jean Piaget

Piaget believed:

- children are actively involved in their own learning
- children learn by:
  - **assimilation**, (absorbing new information)
  - **accommodation** (adapting current understanding to fit the new information).

Lev Vygotsky

Vygotsky believed:

- children are active in their own learning
- children learn through social interaction
- children use language to develop the thought process
- the zone of proximal development describes what a child can achieve with adult help.