Comparison Of Classical And Operant Conditioning

Two recognised learning theories that are aimed to explain how learning occurs are Classical conditioning and Operant Conditioning.

Pavlov (1995) was considered the creator of Classical conditioning. His theory derived from presenting a dog with an unconditioned stimulus, in this case, food, that this would provoke an unconditioned response in the form of the dog salivating. He then added a sensory factor, of a bell ringing, after a while, he removed the food and he found that the dog still salivated at the sound of the bell. The theory of Classical Conditioning deals with the learning process leading us to gain new behaviour via the process of association. Pavlov's dog was conditioned by associating food with the sound of a bell. Classical Conditioning works by pairing involuntary response with stimulus. After which, an unconditioned response becomes a conditioned response. Physiologists and psychologists have concluded that conditioned response could result in the appearance of phobias. Some of the most famous studies in the area of classical conditioning has been conducted by Watson (2007) on a little boy identified as Little Albert. The experiment suggests that an individual is also capable of being programmed to feel terror. When Little Albert was trained to respond to the white rat in the experiment, Albert then exhibited anxiety toward all white things, e.g. white hair, white rabbits etc. Examples of classical conditioning can be found for instance when you are faced with the familiar smell of food being cooked, your mouth starts watering before it is even on the plate, the smell of the food alone stimulates the same role as the ringing bell in Pavlov’s theory.

Operant conditioning was discovered by B.F. Skinner (1969). He presumed that learning took place through outcomes, both positive and negative, rewards and consequences. Reinforcement and punishments were the basis of this theory whereby reinforcements are the stimuli that increase the rate of behaviour in an individual, whereas punishments are the stimuli that decreased behaviour. His experiment used rats in boxes which had a lever inside, if the level was pressed it would release water or food pellets. The rats would press against the lever gaining a reward of food or water which Skinner referred to as positive reinforcement. Later, he added grids which gave electric shocks when activated by the rats, he called this a negative reinforcement. Positive reinforcement is where good behaviour can be encouraged by rewards. Negative reinforcement is where the likelihood of poor behaviour can be discouraged with an unpleasant consequence. When a child receives praise for performing a chore without complaint, for example cleaning their room, they are more likely to continue to perform that task in the future, this is an example of positive reinforcement, judicial sentences are sometimes shortened for good behaviour this is classic negative reinforcement.

Through evaluation of Pavlov’s and Skinner’s experiment it appears that although they each have strengths and weaknesses, they play an important role within the study of human behaviour. Both studies have shown that classical conditioning and operant conditioning can be useful in animals as well as humans as separate topics. By recognising that these two processes occur at the same time can also add to the understanding of human behaviour, such as conditioned fears.