Advantages and Disadvantages of Classical Conditioning

Advantages

- Emphasises learning from the environment
- Supports nurture over nature
- Based on scientific and empirical evidence
- Complex behaviour broken down into smaller and understandable stimuli
- Improve or control desired behaviour

Disadvantages

- Does not allow a free will of the individual/animal
- May lack validity
- Limited in describing behaviour nature or nurture

Little Albert Experiment.

Little Albert was a 9-month-old infant who was tested on his reactions to various stimuli. He was shown a white rat, a rabbit, a monkey and various masks. Albert described as "on the whole stolid and unemotional" showed no fear of any of these stimuli. However, what did startle him and cause him to be afraid was if a hammer was struck against a steel bar behind his head. The sudden loud noise would cause "little Albert to burst into tears."

When Little Albert was just over 11 months old the white rat was presented and seconds later the hammer was struck against the steel bar. This was done 7 times over the next 7 weeks and each time Little Albert burst into tears. By now little Albert only had to see the rat and he immediately showed every sign of fear. He would cry (whether or not the hammer was hit against the steel bar) and he would attempt to crawl away.

"He was on the whole stolid and unemotional...the infant was confronted suddenly and for the first time successively with a white rat, a rabbit, a dog, a monkey, with masks with and without hair, cotton wool, burning newspapers, etc... Manipulation was the most usual reaction called out. At
you would have been positively reinforced (i.e. rewarded) and would be likely to repeat the behaviour. If, however, the main consequence was that you were caught, caned, suspended from school and your parents became involved you would most certainly have been punished or negatively reinforced, and you would consequently be much less likely to smoke now.

**Positive Reinforcement**

Positive reinforcement strengthens a behaviour by providing a consequence an individual finds rewarding. For example, if your teacher gives you £5 each time you complete your homework (i.e. a reward) you will be more likely to repeat this behaviour in the future, this is strengthening the behaviour of completing your homework.

**Negative Reinforcement**

The removal of an unpleasant reinforcer can also strengthen behaviour. This is known as negative reinforcement because it is the removal of an adverse stimulus which is ‘rewarding’ to the animal or person. Negative reinforcement strengthens behaviour because it stops or removes an unpleasant experience.

For example, if you do not complete your homework, you give your teacher £5. You will complete your homework to avoid paying £5, this is strengthening the behaviour of completing your homework.

**Punishment (weakens behaviour)**

Punishment is defined as the opposite of reinforcement since it is designed to weaken or eliminate a response rather than increase it. It is an aversive event that decreases the behaviour that it follows.

Like reinforcement, punishment can work either by directly applying an unpleasant stimulus (like a shock after a response or by removing a potentially rewarding stimulus, for instance, deducting someone’s pocket money to punish undesirable behaviour).

**Note:** It is not always easy to distinguish between punishment and negative reinforcement.

There are many problems with using punishment, such as:
consequences. Observational learning could not occur unless cognitive processes were at work.

Children observe the people around them behaving in various ways. This is illustrated during the famous Bobo doll experiment (Bandura, 1961).

Individuals that are observed are called models. In society, children are surrounded by many influential models, such as parents within the family, characters on children’s TV, friends within their peer group and teachers at school. These models provide examples of behaviour to observe and imitate, e.g. masculine and feminine, pro and anti-social etc.

Children pay attention to some of these models and encode their behaviour. At a later time they may imitate (i.e. copy) the behaviour they have observed. They may do this regardless of whether the behaviour is ‘gender appropriate’ or not, but there are a number of processes that make it more likely that a child will reproduce the behaviour that its society deems appropriate for its sex.

Firstly, the child is more likely to attend to and imitate those models that are similar to the child itself. Consequently, it is more likely to imitate behaviour modelled by people of the same sex.

Secondly, the people around the child will respond to the behaviour the child imitates with either reinforcement or punishment. If it imitates a model’s behaviour and the consequences are rewarding, the child is likely to continue performing the behaviour. If parent sees a little girl consoling her teddy bear and says “what a kind girl you are”, this is rewarding for the child and makes it more likely that she will repeat the behaviour. Her behaviour has been reinforced (i.e. strengthened).

Reinforcement can be external or internal and can be positive or negative. If a child wants approval from parents or peers, this approval is an external reinforcement, but feeling happy about being approved of is an internal reinforcement. A child will behave in a way which it believes will earn approval because it desires approval.

Positive (or negative) reinforcement will have little impact if the reinforcement offered externally does not match with an individual’s needs. Reinforcement can be positive or negative, but the important factor is that it will usually lead to a change in a person’s behaviour.

Thirdly, the child will also take into account of what happens to other people when deciding whether or not to copy someone’s actions. This is known as vicarious reinforcement.

Bobo Doll Experiment

Bandura (1961) conducted a study to investigate if social behaviours (i.e. aggression) can be acquired by observation and imitation.