
Social Learning Theory: The Effectiveness Of Learning Perspectives Through A Form Of Different Therapy

The aim of this essay is to write about the most important aspects of and give arguments for and against how effective the learning perspective is as a form of therapy. There are lots of different lines of thinking when it comes to understanding the subject of psychology and one of them is behaviourism. It is also known as 'Learning Perspective' or 'Learning Theory'. This school of thought consists of three main ideas; Classical and Operant Conditioning and Social learning theory (SLT).

A Russian psychologist called Ivan Pavlov conducted a study in the 1927 around the reflex of classical conditioning: when dogs see food, they salivate automatically. He found that when the food was repeatedly served with a bell (this acting as the neutral stimulus) eventually the dog learned to expect his food every time, salivating at the sound of this resulting in the conditioned response. After this when the bell was presented on its own the dog went on to salivate without the presence of the food. Classical conditioning only applies to reflexive response. One of the greatest strengths of this study is that it is highly scientific. With a large majority of Pavlov's experiments being conducted in labs meaning they can be repeated easily and there are very few chances of extraneous variables. However, following this there is also weaknesses to this experiment, these being ethically. As the dogs were tied up and having their salivary glands connected to test tubes, this would have been very uncomfortable and distressing for them. Another limitation being that humans may not act the same as the dogs.

John B. Watson conducted a conditioned study nicknamed "Little Albert" which shows that humans can be conditioned into such things as fear from a neutral stimulus being the white rat or any white-fluffy-objects like rats being presented to an 18-month-old little boy. These objects then being paired with an uncomfortably loud noise, eventually he started to cry when he saw white fluffy objects in fear of the noise. This gives us insight into learned fear (conditioned response) and phobias, backing that Pavlov's findings may be relevant to humans. However, this experiment was extremely unethical and could not be repeated today.

When a child presented with an environmental stimulus by receiving lots of positive praise for performing well at school, this will encourage the child to behave well and in a positive manner. This is known as positive reinforcement. Negative reinforcement is if the desired behaviour breaks down leading to the termination of an adverse stimulus for example every time the child shows negative behaviour they will not be rewarded he will eventually alter his behaviour to avoid this undesirable consequence. This is slightly different from punishment as punishment will not necessarily promote positive behaviour as how positive reinforcement could.

In 1938 B.F. Skinner showed this in his study of rats and how animals can learn from the consequences of their actions, showing that it was possible to condition the rat's behaviour by using positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement and punishment. He placed a rat into a box where he positively reinforced their desired behaviour, switching a lever releasing their food. The rats learnt that when they switched the lever themselves when entering the box that it also released their food. The lever was switched off by Skinner every time the rat pushed it themselves, this being the negative reinforcement.

Although this behaviour is demonstrated by various studies it does not account that different species have different capacities for learning by conditioning, some however may learn by simple observation with no reinforcement involved. And the research is mostly on animals which have been generalised to humans, so it is to an extent assumptive. It's also does not account for how our genes influence our behaviour we can learn in other ways than conditioning (CGP Ltd, 2015). Wolfgang Kohler's findings where that primates often problem solve much faster in insight rather than learning through trial and error. Where as Bandura believes that humans can learn through observation through example of his "Bobo doll" experiment.

Moving on from Skinners study there has been many useful therapies invented to help with positive reinforcement such as good behaviour rewards in schools where good behaviour is rewarded with "gold stars" amounting up to school trips and activities. Limitations to this theory can be that this is classed a bribery encouraging us to feel like we must fit into the "norm". If these aren't met it can lead to the individual feeling left out, like they are under achieving or further undesired behaviour.

Expanding on conditioning, Bandura developed the Social Learning Theory in the 1960's. He believed that people also learnt a lot from role models (CGP Ltd, 2015). In one of his studies he called the "bobo doll" in 1961, he investigated the acquisition on behaviours through observation and imitation. A group of preschool children were shown how to be aggressive towards a bounce back blow up toy through observing the behaviour of the adults towards the doll this validating the social learning theory. The results however dismissed the biological approach did not show the main differences between the boys who were being shown to be more aggressive where the girls were being more aggressive verbally. This does not consider any genetic or natural influences, dismissing the biological approach which he had initially suggested validating within the study. Also, observational learning can take place a long time after they have been observed making it more difficult to study. Ethically the small children were exposed to aggressive behaviour from the adults around them, this may have caused them distress or encouragement to carry out the aggressive behaviour outside of the experiment.

The social learning theory combines learning through the association and consequence of classical and operant conditioning with a process of mediation like the cognitive approach which includes an action of being noticed, remembered and reproduced. The conditioning theory can be used as a treatment for psychological disorders such as Phobias, these are known as behavioural therapies.

Another popular form of behavioural therapy is Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). It is widely used to treat depression, addiction and schizophrenia. Being based on encouraging the patient to notice negative thoughts and test how accurate they are resulting in a positive change in behaviour. The individual may be less likely for relapse compared to drug therapy. Arron.T Beck's cognitive therapy supports the idea that depression is related to cognition with many depression sufferers benefitting. Whereas Albert Ellis in the 1960's believed that an event can change your beliefs and feelings, causing depression, for example trouble at work or break down of relationships. However, CBT can be less effective when the therapists lack experience and is time and cost-intensive. Looking at how the individual is feeling now placing this solely the root for depression, not taking into consideration the biological factors of depression.

Behavioural therapies can possibly challenge behaviours based on conditioning, this is the case when aversion therapy is used. Aversion therapy is a behavioural therapy which helps treat

addiction, by forming negative associations with addictive behaviour. Being a form of classical conditioning Meyer and Chesser (1970) believed that a negative association can be formed with an addiction when paired with an unpleasant stimulus, e.g nausea drugs or previously used electric shock treatments. They prescribed a group of alcoholics a nausea-inducing drug called Antabuse, asking them to test the alcohol when feeling sick. Causing a negative conditioned response to the alcohol. While it is positive in treating addictions and being used in conjunction with biological or cognitive therapies, it does include limitations. These being it having a high relapse rate, depending on the individual's avoidance to the stimulus and can be time-consuming. Including controversial ethical issues. Previously a form of aversion therapy was used to try and treat Homosexuality, this being with electric shock treatments whenever the individual became aroused by an appropriate stimulus. This would have been very painful and degrading. It could have also caused depression or suicidal thoughts due to being made to believe that homosexuality was an illness and not politically correct to society.

Flooding being a type of classical conditioning which exposes a patient to a phobia for long periods at a time encouraging the patient to realise that the high anxiety can't be maintained at the initial rate. E.g. a patient would be taken to a high building (the stimulus), whilst climbing up to the top their anxiety would be extremely high, however the longer they are at the top the more they realise that it will be ok, possibly over coming their fear or phobia. This would work well with most phobias and can be done in real life situations. With only a few limitations. One being participation is needed from the patient throughout the course, they would not be able to back out during as this may cause higher amounts of anxiety towards the phobia.

In summary the learning perspective provides a useful range of therapies on their own and combined with other therapies such as drug therapy. However, they do present their own limitations. These being many ethical issues excluding that the theories are reductionist. Many of the theories looked at have disregarded assumptions made from other approaches such as the biological approach towards depression and gender roles.