

Is Punishment An Effective Behavioural Modification Strategy?

By

Cameron Beveridge

The use of punishment as behaviour modification strategy is a real ethical dilemma in contemporary psychology. This is due to the fact there have been more appropriate or passive treatments to modify behaviour such as aversion therapy, classical conditioning (Pavlov) and observational learning (Bandura), as well as reinforcement (Skinner). Punishment can be defined as any outcome that weakens the probability of a response (Lilienfeld, Lynn, Namy & Woolf, 2011). Teachers or parents often use this technique, by removing pleasant stimuli from an individual, or exposing an individual to unpleasant stimuli. Due to the unorthodox nature of this behavioural modification being too harsh or damaging to an individual. It's behavioural modification methods such as Observational learning in which Albert Bandura concluded when an observer's behaviour changes after seeing the behaviour of a model and the consequences of their actions (Funderstanding, 1998). Classical conditioning (Pavlov) involves associating a previously neutral stimulus is paired to another stimuli that produces an automatic response (Lilienfeld, Lynn, Namy & Woolf, 2011). Reinforcement is defined as any outcome that strengthens the probability of a response (Lilienfeld, Lynn, Namy & Woolf, 2011). All these techniques will be considered and compared to help conclude whether or not punishment is the most effective behaviour modification strategy.

Punishment and reinforcement was most famously case studied by B. F. Skinner, and his work with the Skinner box. Punishment and reinforcement both come under the behavioural modification model of operant conditioning. Breaking this model down, by mainly focusing on punishment at this point, Skinner concluded just like positive and negative reinforcement, there is positive and negative punishment, by removing of presenting stimuli (Lilienfeld, Lynn, Namy & Woolf, 2011). The difference

between the reinforcement and punishment is that punishment is applied to decrease certain behaviours whereas reinforcement promotes a particular behaviour. The issue is why is it necessary to apply negative stimuli to an individual to get a desired response when the exact same outcome can be achieved by reinforcement which may be less damaging psychologically and even physically.

Jill Kunishima, Kasi Welte and Dean Morier (2004), who conducted a study on the effects of punishment on loafing, found that despite participants being under threats of punishment loafing was still persistent amongst the participants. The experimenters did not threaten the participants with corporal punishment but threats of an undesired stimulus. This shows that verbal punishment isn't as effective as intended in this situation where as corporal punishment may serve better response in decreasing a specific behaviour. Richard Niolon (2010) also found that there was an increase in negative behaviour and a decrease in desired behaviours due to the use of corporal punishment such as hitting, or physically abusing an individual. These examples show that both forms punishment have been proven ineffective at behavioural modification. Findings have also found that punishment can lead to abuse and, also potentially psychologically damaging to the individual (David Benatar, 2001).

Reinforcement has been supported to be a lot more rewarding in comparison to punishment. Skinner's original "Skinner box" experiment involving a rat, where for each correct behavioural response, the rat was rewarded with a tasty treat. The other part of the experiment involved a continuous shock until the desired behaviour was performed and thus the electric shock would cease. For every correct response, the reaction time to perform the desired behaviour would increase steadily.

Pomerantz & Terkel's (2009) study on the effects of positive reinforcement on chimpanzees, found to be very conclusive that the mood of the chimpanzees in the open outside pen to be much more pleasant after several weeks, following being in the closed pen for behaving inappropriately with others. There have been no claims of negative effects of reinforcement other than that using reinforcement to increase a problematic desired behaviour. This ultimately shows when in comparison to that of punishment, reinforcement has less repercussions, as well as a better result from an individual than that of punishment being used as a behavioural modification.

Ivan Pavlov, the pioneer of classical conditioning first made his discovery by causing a dog "to respond to a previously neutral stimuli that had been paired with another stimuli that elicits an automatic response" (Lilienfeld, Lynn, Namy & Woolf, 2011). It was John Watson who translated Pavlov's findings into a controversial human experiment known as the "Little Albert" case study. The reason for this controversy is that the experiment failed a lot of standard ethical guidelines relating to a psychological experiment, such as no informed consent from a parent, no issued help to a psychologist if any adverse effects come of the study and "Little Albert" was unable to speak, therefore unable to withdraw from the study at any time he pleaded (Gerald. P. Koehler and Patricia Keith-Spiegel, 2007). Despite the ethical issues involved in the experiment, the results were found to be very interesting. Watson conditioned Little Albert to be afraid of a white rat, by administering a loud noise whenever Albert came close to the white rat (Watson, 1920). After a number of trials Albert would cry when near the rat. What was interesting is that Albert had developed stimulus generalization; this is where any stimuli similar to the one that a person has become conditioned to respond in the same way to that similar stimulus.

This method of behavioural modification can be debated whether or not it is a better method than that of punishment. The problem with the Little Albert experiment is that it hasn't been re-conducted due to it is breach of ethics, making it harder to generalize to the wider population due to the fact it had only been conducted once and that was on a single child. No conclusion can be made to whether if it would be effective on an adult or adolescent due to developmental level of their brain and cognitive development. It's also didn't specifically change an undesired behaviour, but created one. In comparison to punishment, one could say that the issues relating to one another are similar in that they both have their ethical issues, however, it appears based on Watson's results it is more effective creating a behavioural change, rather than using punishment.

Observational learning is an interesting model of behaviour modification in that "it is a form of latent learning because it allows us to learn with out reinforcement" (Lilienfeld, Lynn, Namy & Woolf, 2011).

Albert Bandura is mostly renowned for his experiment with observational learning of aggression or more specifically known as the "Bobo Doll" studies (Lilienfeld, Lynn, Namy & Woolf, 2011). It was through this experiment that showed that children through observational learning could develop aggressive behaviour through watching an older model expressing anger to a doll, Bobo (Bandura, Ross & Ross, 1963). The experiment involved a group of children, a control and an experimental group. The control didn't observe a model attacking the Bobo doll, where as the experimental group watched on as they say the model yell, kick and attack the inflatable doll. The kids watched on form a play room where they had toys to play with such as cars, and figurines, before being asked to proceed into a room

where there was an identical doll to the one which they saw the model attack. The experimental group that saw the model attacking the doll proceeded to do the same, even yelling the same verbal abuse as the model (Dr. C. George Boeree, 1998).

It's clear that children take a lot in when observing a model. One thing that isn't taken into account in this experiment is if whether or not the children participants would react in the same way if they saw another child of the same age participate in the same way the adult model did. It may in adversely cause the participants to feel sympathetic towards to doll and see it as a means of bullying, rather than a social norm when an authority figure condones these aggressive actions. In another experiment Barbi Law and Craig Hall (2009) found that male and female adults when participating in new novice sports, they were able to self-efficiently learn a sport by watching and then participating in the game after a number of round watching experienced players. This shows there is no discrimination in age of observational learning, and isn't only applied to younger children.

In comparison to that of punishment, there are no adverse effects of problematic traumas or stress to those who were exposed to the behavioural modification, as it is a latent form of behavioural modification. This issue with this form of behavioural modification is there is no reinforcement, so it would be easy for an individual to forget or reform to their old habits if not continuously performed. This is where punishment has an edge in it is model as it reinforces the removal of certain behaviour and not to mention observational learning can cause more problematic undesired behaviours if the model is not careful in their actions.

Aversion therapy, most commonly used for treating people with extreme phobias, or people dealing with any addiction such as smoking or alcoholism. This is achieved by

using similar association as that compared to classical conditioning, but induces usually a physical sickness to neutral stimuli when we wish to decrease a desired behaviour.

A well-known experiment involving the aversion therapy method was the curing of homosexuality by conditioning an individual to feel repulsed at the site of other men (1965). There were no named experimenters that took part in this study. Unfortunately the results of this experiment were deemed catastrophic, as one of the participants died three days into the treatment, due to the therapy and the psychological and physical stress that was put on the body of the individual. Since then, in 2006, the American psychological association deemed it unethical to treat homosexuality with aversion therapy. This shows the severity and dangers of what aversion therapy can potentially do. Results of another homosexual aversion therapy treatment showed it to be 27% successful (Bieber, 1967).

Sharma & Singh (2009) conducted an experiment where they trialed a number of behavioural modification techniques on a problematic twelve-year old that had epilepsy. The results of their experiment showed that using aversion therapy was successful, but not as successful as that compared to reinforcement, and punishment, however it did show better results than that of observational learning. This is where aversion therapy shows to be effective in that it almost completely removes the problematic behaviour.

After the analysis of aversion therapy in comparison to punishment in terms of behavioural modification, it can be said that aversion therapy can be used as a behavioural modification method, however, there are some issues relating the matter. If not conducted correctly and ethically there is a chance that a desired behaviour could become worse, or a certain everyday stimuli may become conditioned to cause

severe discomfort to the individual after the behaviour has stopped. Then the next issue is once the behavioural problem is removed, how can one stop the response to the stimuli that induces the discomfort to reduce an undesired behaviour. Punishment is disputably a better behaviour modification technique in that it requires less time to condition the individual and has less severe psychological issues relating to it, as well as using punishment as a technique is a lot easier to conduct than using aversion therapy.

It can be clearly seen that there are a number of behavioural techniques that can be used as behavioural modification models.

It is clear that each behavioural modification technique has its advantages and disadvantages. Punishment has its issues relating to the psychological and emotional damage to individuals including the physical damage as well depending on the nature of the punishment. This is to say it is a lot easier to use punishment as compared to many of the other methods of behavioural modification, where as the results vary in terms of removing problematic behaviours, which means the effectiveness of punishment depends on the way it is administered and the individual that is being punished. Despite this being the case it is safe to say that punishment could be a better method behavioural modification than aversion therapy. This is because it is hard to conduct, and can have some major repercussions if not administered properly causing severe distress and psychological damage to the individual. Observation learning being a latent form of learning means it is not being reinforced, shows to be very effective, but behaviour modification can be short lived, if tasks aren't repeated, and especially as it isn't being reinforced. The positives of this method is a person can display what the consequences of ones actions can be to

an individual without them realizing and taking that information in without any reinforcement. Classical conditioning can be effective with people, but is hard to make a conclusion whether or not it is effective on older people as studies tend to have been done on younger people, which make it tough to generalize to a wider population. There are also issues with stimuli discrimination and generalization which can be problematic to an individual if they have been conditioned to respond to one stimuli then end up responding to a number of them, which can cause great distress.

Reinforcement has seen to be the most effective for of behavioural modification. Results have shown to be very positive and are based on reward rather than the infliction of discomfort. Due to this, there is minimal to no psychological stress or physical harm, therefore, reinforcement is a proven effective form of behavioural modification rather than that of punishment.

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