

B. F. Skinner 1904 - 1990

B. F. Skinner published controversial works on animal behaviour and on his ideas of a utopian society based on his theories.

Skinner's experiments in operant conditioning:

An animal (usually a rat or a pigeon) was placed in a 'Skinner – Box', this animal was conditioned to get a food reward if it learned to press or to peck a device.

After training, the animal showed a conditioned response (pushing of lever) in the absence of the unconditioned stimulus (food) as the response was reinforced (by a sound).

Skinner developed a simple feedback system called 'operant conditioning'.

Operant conditioning involved reinforcing and shaping spontaneous responses by delivering scheduled negative or positive reinforcers (electric shock or food) as a consequence to the conditioned response, this made the response more probable in the future.

Real life examples of operant conditioning are:

- Working for a weekly pay check or disciplining a child to change their behaviour. The use of reward, punishment and the change of environment have all been used for hundreds and thousands of years by lovers, animal trainers, parents, bosses. If the behaviour yields rewards (reinforcements), then the behaviour is strengthened.
- 1960's and 70's, the uses of reinforcement in behaviour modification therapy were very popular with psychologists, esp. in schools and with the mentally ill and the emotionally disabled.
- It was the key method in self-help therapy: reward the behaviour you desire in others and yourself.

Skinner concentrated on the variables and forces in the environment that influence a person, the person's personality were not important to him. Any hopes in the individuals for rewards, plans, intentions and powerful emotions were ignored, in operant learning the only factor that influences behaviour is reinforcement and behaviour is only understood through responses to the environment.

Skinner did point out that the most common behavioural control of punishment did not have the long-term intentioned effect of the elimination of certain behaviours and that positive reinforcements were more effective in controlling behaviour.

Basic explanation of operant conditioning

First:

Stimulus & sound in tray → response (raise lever) → reinforcement (food)

After training:

Conditioned response (lever) → Conditioned reinforcement (sound)

After a while:

No food → behaviour extinguished

