

Operant Conditioning for Everything

Operant conditioning gets a bad rap. It gets confused with classical conditioning, which gets associated with Pavlov, which makes everyone think about salivating dogs, bells, and rats getting shocked in search of cheese.

The dog and cheese stuff of classical conditioning is about creating involuntary biological responses. Hear a bell and the body produces saliva. Operant conditioning has to do with voluntary behavior and consequences more directly related to action. For example, getting a cookie when you sing a song may make you choose to sing more songs or feel positive about singing, but it doesn't make your body involuntarily sing in the presence of cookies.

Both kinds of conditioning are scary in the hands of social experimenters. If anyone talks about turning the world into their lab and running giant programs to generate socially desirable behavior, run the other direction.

But operant conditioning is a great tool to use on yourself!

It's really about creating and putting yourself into incentive structures where the kind of person who would be rewarded is the kind of person you'd like to be. It affects the kind of people you spend time with. If you surround yourself with friends that affirm you for sitting around not growing, you're conditioning yourself to do more of that. If you're around people that are more fun to share growth and challenges with, you'll push yourself to grow more.

It means taking control of the reward systems you enter. Social media is a potent area. The things that get rewarded with likes, comments, or shares, are not always things that help you become more of who you want to be. It's easy to chase likes while running away from a self you like. If you understand operant conditioning, it helps you see it and adjust.

Your behavior affects others too. When you see stuff on your news feed that makes your life better, you click like. When you see stuff you want less of, you ignore. This conditions other social users to behave in certain ways to get those lovely likes.

None of this is groundbreaking. It happens all the time whether we realize it or not. But conscious awareness of the process increases ability to control it. Conditioning is going to happen. Wouldn't you rather condition yourself than be conditioned without knowing it?