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## Long Strange Trip

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## Long Strange Trip

by Jason Schramm

(Psychology 100 and English 101: Adult Fast Track)

The Assignment: Write a paper that defines and differentiates between classical and operant conditioning, providing examples from your own behavior.

I turn the corner and there it sits. It's motionless, and my steely gaze is locked unwaveringly upon it. My muscles are rigid with fear and anticipation, but I hardly notice. There have been so many times I've faced this same situation staring down this long hall. My arch enemy is staring back at me without emotion. I feel no sense of respect for what has vanquished me time and time again. I'm filled only with hate, so much so, that I can almost feel the ire spilling out from me. Hatred this intense can only be created by the pain and scarring of many lost battles. Countless one-sided defeats have beaten down my optimism over time and replaced it not with a quiet resolve, but with a rage and fury so consuming it takes over my entire being and fundamentally changes who I am. This time will be different. This time I will be the victor. This time the other will finally taste defeat.

Many of our daily activities are learned responses. Some of them have been instilled in us for so long that we don't even realize that we have learned them at one point. They have become second nature. These are the learned responses that seem to run the deepest. They are so ingrained in our psyche that they most often connect with our most primal and intense emotions. The feelings of rage, love, fear and passion are oftentimes tapped by these learned responses. Behaviorists have effectively explained learning, a change in behavior and/or knowledge due to experience, by classifying the relationships between different responses and stimuli as classical conditioning or operant conditioning. Any given example of classical conditioning should include components that can be labeled as an unconditioned stimulus, an unconditioned response, a conditioned stimulus, and a conditioned response. Conversely, under the operant conditioning umbrella, a conditioned response can be qualified as born of positive reinforcement, positive punishment, and negative punishment. Everyone has examples of all of these conditioned behaviors in their everyday lives. Unfortunately, most people don't have the information necessary to recognize them. This can lead to faulty decision making in countless aspects of a person's life. I will share a few examples of the different types of conditioning as found in my own experiences to lend some concrete foundation to these principles.

In the opening paragraph I wrote about an experience that was very familiar to me. While reading it, you may have been drawn to attention, waiting for the next development between my arch enemy and myself. I wonder, would you have been so interested had I told you what my arch enemy truly was at the beginning of the story? It was an ordinary, metal, commercial door handle. You may be wondering how something as common and seemingly harmless as an ordinary door handle could cause such an erratic and emotionally charged response from a grown man. Actually, it wasn't the door handle at all. I used to work for a retail operation on Chicago's Magnificent Mile early in my varied career. The upper office floors of the building were carpeted with the most electrically charged carpet I have ever come in contact with. There was one specific hallway that was so charged a person listening closely could hear the hum. It was at end of this hallway that the door to the smoking break area stood. It was this door that held the handle that stood between my ultimate pleasure and myself. This handle that, when touched, would undoubtedly deliver one of the most potent shocks ever to go unrecorded by man. A shock so potent, it could only be characterized as the mother of all electric shocks. Daily, as I would approach the handle, my muscles would become tense. My brain would start to cramp in anticipation of the ensuing pain. The apprehension building in my body would build into anger over the needless pain I was about to endure from such a simple act. I would spite the fool that chose the carpet for this hallway, and wish horrible things upon his family. Finally, I would raise my hand to within a quarter of an inch from the handle. I would then swat at it with a series of twitching motions reminiscent of a rabbit readying to flee a potential

threat. Over time this ritual became an accepted response to this door handle.

If the experience had caused me to react in this way to all door handles, it would have been an example of a phenomenon known as stimulus generalization, but my learned response was localized to this specific handle, causing it to be termed stimulus discrimination. The true cause of the behavior, or unconditioned stimulus, was the shock generated by the friction between my shoes and the carpet. The response was the tension and pain, and bridging from that, the anger and spastic hand motions. This would be considered the unconditioned response because it occurred naturally when faced with the unconditioned stimulus. The cause of this response was in turn transferred to the door handle. This fact became evident when the eventual removal of the carpet (and electric shocks) was followed with the continuation of the behavior. The tension and swatting of the door handle remained long after the threat of electric shock had passed. Therefore, the conditioned response was the same as the unconditioned response, but it was now attached to the conditioned stimulus (door handle) instead of the unconditioned stimulus (electric shock). Over time, the response faded and “normal” door opening activity returned. This is a concept known as extinction. It occurs when the separation of the unconditioned and conditioned stimuli eventually results in the ceasing of the conditioned response. Years later, I returned to the building to visit some old friends. On the way down the hall, the tension and hand swiping returned uncontrollably. This phenomenon is known as spontaneous recovery, and goes a long way to support the concept that human memory could be permanent.

Prior to my battles with static electricity, I had many other experiences that can be related to conditioned responses. When I was in high school I wanted nothing more than my autonomy. I wanted to be free from the watchful eye of my parents and three older brothers. My desire to break off from the family and take greater control of my life led me to engage in what some would refer to as self-destructive behavior. I began to fail classes in school, and in time stopped going to school altogether. I was a habitual alcohol abuser and often used people around me only as means to an end. I broke every rule set for me, and took every opportunity to flaunt my utter disregard for my parents’ authority. This led to a rift forming in my relationship with my family. Their anger and emotional pain led to a lack of trust and feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. In order to avoid those uncomfortable feelings, they chose to distance themselves from me. They essentially were giving me the autonomy that I had desired, which caused me to exhibit even more outrageous behavior in hopes of increasing my freedom. This is an example of positive reinforcement. It’s termed positive because I *received* freedom as a consequence. We attach the term reinforcement because the unruly behavior was *strengthened* by the consequence.

Continuing on the theme of Jason Schramm: The Wasted Years (wasted taking on a double meaning), before the conception of my son I lived with a complete lack of concern and respect for the basic functions of life. Literally, sleeping, consumption of food, even living in general had lost all importance in my list of priorities. My short list consisted of cigarettes, beer, and Jerry Springer. I felt that I had no purpose in life, and therefore no reason to strive for anything greater than the good spot on the couch. Then my wife (girlfriend at the time) came to me to inform me that we were expecting. I was going to be given the greatest gift. There would be another life dependent solely upon my wife and myself. Little did I know that I was also getting another gift. I was sitting in the center of the room and Lisa came up behind me. In a flash, she smacked me in the back of the head with all of her might. When the stars cleared, she was standing above me talking about responsibility and the need to grow up. Finally, I listened. This gave me the sense of purpose and responsibility I needed to respect and embrace life. Almost instantly, my behavior changed to what would be considered responsible and admirable, a turnaround that shocked everyone but myself. The smack in the back of the head that was *given* to me was the positive once again, but this time my behavior was *weakened*, causing us to define this experience as learning through positive punishment.

The final chapter in the odyssey that is my life involves an example of negative punishment. In my quest to live fast, die young, and leave a good looking corpse, I found myself speeding in my 1986 Trans Am Firebird more often than not. One year I was convicted three times within a period of twelve months. Under Illinois law, that number of moving violation convictions in that period of time results in an immediate suspension of driving privileges, along with numerous monetary fines. The behaviorists

term the cost of the fines as “response cost”. The night I spent in jail would be considered a “timeout”. When my driving privileges were reinstated, I initially stayed at or near the speed limit. Over time, I gradually returned to speeding. This is another good example of extinction. The original suspension resulting in the behavior change would be considered negative because my driving privileges were *removed*. The experience was a negative punishment because the result was a *weakening* of my speeding behavior.

When examining my life, I am presented with many examples of both classical and operant conditioning. I am convinced that these are two effective methods of explaining learning, a change in behavior and/or knowledge due to experience, which behaviorists have conceived and introduced. Classical conditioning contains the basic components of conditioned and unconditioned stimuli, and conditioned and unconditioned responses. Operant conditioning involves different means of conditioning including positive reinforcement, positive punishment, and negative punishment. A greater understanding of these concepts has allowed for the definition of occurrences such as extinction, spontaneous recovery, stimulus discrimination, stimulus generalization, response cost, and timeout. My life is a web of stimuli and responses, and in the immortal words of the late, great Jerry Garcia...

“What a long strange trip it’s been.”