Law of effect

A principle associated with learning and behavior which states that behaviors that lead to satisfying outcomes are more likely to be repeated than behaviors that lead to unwanted outcomes.

Psychologists have been interested in the factors that are important in behavior change and control since psychology emerged as a discipline. One of the first principles associated with learning and behavior was the Law of Effect, which states that behaviors that lead to satisfying outcomes are likely to be repeated, whereas behaviors that lead to undesired outcomes are less likely to recur.

This principle, which most learning theorists accept as valid, was developed by Edward Lee Thorndike, who provided the basis for the field of operant conditioning. Prior to Thorndike, many psychologists interested in animal behavior attributed learning to reasoning on the animal’s part. Thorndike instead theorized that animals learn by trial and error. When something works to the animal’s satisfaction, the animal draws a connection or association between the behavior and positive outcome. This association forms the basis for later behavior. When the animal makes an error, on the other hand, no association is formed between the behavior that led to the error and a positive outcome, so the ineffective behavior is less likely to recur.

Initially, Thorndike drew parallels between positive outcomes, which would be termed reinforcement by the behaviorists, and negative outcomes, which would be referred to as punishments. Later, however, he asserted that punishment was ineffective in removing the connection between the behavior and the result. Instead, he suggested that, following a punishment, behavior was likely to be less predictable.

Thorndike also developed his Law of Exercise, which states that responses that occur in a given situation become more strongly associated with that situation. He suggested that these two laws could account for all behavior. As such, psychologists had no need to refer to abstract thought in defining the way that behavior is learned. Everything is associated with the effects of reward and punishment, according to Thorndike.

Further Reading

Arnold Allan Lazarus

1932-
South African clinical psychologist who developed a comprehensive psychotherapy called multimodal therapy.

As a graduate student in psychology, Arnold Lazarus first developed a therapy based on behavioral psychology. He expanded this into cognitive behavior therapy, and later into a multi-faceted psychotherapy known as multimodal therapy. In recent years, Lazarus has written popular psychology books. Lazarus has held numerous professional positions and won many honors, including the Distinguished Service Award of the American Board of Professional Psychology in 1982 and the Distinguished Psychologist Award of the Division of Psychotherapy of the American Psychological Association (APA) in 1992. In 1996 he became the first recipient of the Psiye Award of the Nicholas and Dorothy Cummings Foundation. Lazarus is a professor emeritus in the Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology at Rutgers University in Piscataway, New Jersey and continues in private practice.

Lazarus was born in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 1932, the son of Benjamin and Rachel (Mosselson) Lazarus. Educated at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, he earned his B.A. with honors in 1956, his M.A. in 1957, and his Ph.D. in clinical psychology in 1960. In 1956, he married Daphne Ann Kessel; they have a son and a daughter.

Develops behavior therapy

In 1958, while still a graduate student, Lazarus published a paper in the South African Medical Journal describing a new form of psychotherapy that he called behavior therapy. He began his private practice in psychotherapy in Johannesburg in 1959 and, in 1960, he became vice-president of the Transvaal Workers Educational Association. In 1963, Lazarus spent a year as a visiting assistant professor of psychology at Stanford University, and then returned to the University of Witwatersrand as a lecturer in psychiatry at the medical school. In 1966, he returned to the United States as director of the Behavior Therapy Institute in Sausalito, California. That year he published Behavior Therapy Techniques with Joseph Wolpe. The following year, he moved to Temple University Medical School in Philadelphia as professor of behavioral science. He was a visiting professor of psychology and director of clinical training at Yale University in 1970.

Lazarus was the first psychologist to apply desensitization techniques for treating phobias in group thera-
sessions. With Arnold Abramovitz, he was the first to use emotive imagery in treating children. He studied treatments for alcoholism and was one of the first to apply learning theory to the treatment of depression. By the 1960s, it was clear to Lazarus that the therapy movement he had initiated, utilizing the stimulus-response mechanisms of behaviorist psychology, was too limited for effective psychotherapy. His 1971 book, Behavior Therapy and Beyond, laid the foundations for what became known as cognitive-behavior therapy.

Replaces behavior therapy with multimodal therapy

In 1972, Lazarus received his diploma in clinical psychology from the American Board of Professional Psychology and returned to private practice in Princeton, New Jersey. He also became professor and chairman of the psychology department at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey. He joined the Rutgers Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology in 1974. As Lazarus examined long-term results in patients who had undergone cognitive behavior therapy, he found some inadequacies. For patients with anxiety and panic disorders, obsessive-compulsive problems, depression, and family and marital difficulties, the relapse rate following therapy remained very high. He therefore developed a multimodal therapy, which involves examining and treating seven different but interrelated modalities, or psychological parameters. These modalities are behavior, physiology, cognition, interpersonal relationships, sensation, imagery, and affect. Thus, multimodal therapy involves a complete assessment of the individual and treatments designed specifically for that individual. Lazarus developed his approach, in part, by questioning clients about the factors that had helped them in their therapy. In 1976, Lazarus founded the Multimodal Therapy Institute in Kingston, New Jersey, and he continues to direct that Institute. He established additional Multimodal Therapy Institutes in New York, Virginia, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Texas, and Ohio. His book Multimodal Behavior Therapy was published in 1976.

Joins the self-help movement

In 1975, Lazarus published his first popular self-help book, I Can If I Want To, with his colleague Allen Fay. His 1977 book, In the Mind’s Eye: The Power of Imagery for Personal Enrichment, described the use of mental imagery for personal growth. His recent popular psychology writings include several books written with his son, the psychologist Clifford Neil Lazarus. Their 1993 book with Allen Fay, Don’t Believe It for a Minute!: Forty Toxic Ideas That Are Driving You Crazy, encouraged people to stop repeating the same mistakes. They argued that misconceptions, such as “life should be fair,” lead to depression, anxiety, and feelings of guilt.

During his career, Lazarus has treated thousands of clients, as individuals, couples, families, and groups. He is a diplomate of the International Academy of Behavioral Medicine, Counseling, and Psychotherapy, and he was elected to the National Academy of Practice in Psychology in 1982. Lazarus is the author or editor of fifteen books and more than 200 articles and book chapters and has made video and sound recordings. He has served on the editorial boards of numerous psychology journals. Lazarus has been a fellow of the APA since 1972 and has been on the board of Psychologists for Social Responsibility since 1982. He is a recipient of the Distinguished Career Award from the American Board of Medical Psychotherapists and a fellow of the Academy of Clinical Psychology.

Margaret Alic

Further Reading