Punishment

Punishment is defined as the administration of aversive stimulus to reduce or eliminate unwanted behavior. It can be either physical or nonphysical. Punishment differs from negative reinforcement in that the latter increases the frequency of behavior by removing a negative event. Punishment can be as simple as giving electric shocks to lab rats to prevent them from touching a lever or as complex—and controversial—as placing criminals in jail for breaking the law. The use and effectiveness of corporal punishment have also been debated by psychologists, parents, teachers, and religious leaders for many years.

Research studies have found that punishment is effective in suppressing or eliminating unwanted behavior. But in order for punishment to be effective it must happen immediately after the behavior, be severe, and occur every time the behavior occurs. Detractors of the use of punishment have pointed out that, outside the laboratory setting, it is almost impossible to consistently administer punishment in this manner.

Even when punishment is administered “properly,” psychologists have questioned the value of punishment in truly changing behavior, arguing that the desired outcome is only temporary. As evidenced by increasing crime rates in most major cities, punishment (fines, imprisonment, social stigma, etc.) does not appear to deter unwanted behavior. In addition, psychologists have identified other “downsides” to using punishment. For instance, people use punishment inappropriately, decreasing its effectiveness. People punish when they are upset or angry. The recipient experiences anxiety, fear, rage, or hatred. The use of punishment can lead to more resistance and aggression on the part of the one being punished. The punishment can also backfire—instead of serving to punish a child, for example, spanking brings the wanted attention of a parent. In addition, corporal punishment defeats its own purpose by modeling aggressive or physical behavior, the very behavior it is often attempting to correct.

Most current promoters of punitive discipline in the United States espouse nonphysical forms of control, such as the use of reinforcements, logical consequences, or penalties. With children, behavior modification techniques such as time-out have proven very effective in modifying disruptive behaviors such as hitting, grabbing, talking back, or tantrums.

Further Reading

It has been said that in 1922 brought attention to one of the basic dilemmas confronting educated women of that time.

Further Reading

Pyromania
Irresistible urge to start fires.

Little is known about pyromania. The term comes from the Greek words pyr (fire) and mania (madness). It is a rare condition, listed under the heading of impulse control disorders. Pyromania is not the same as arson (deliberate fire-setting), and not all arsonists (fire-setters) are pyromaniacs. Fires are often started by individuals with this disorder deliberately and with careful planning, rather than by accident. A key feature of this disorder is the presence of repeated association with fire, but with no evidence of a reason or motivation for the fire (such as profit or to hide criminal activity). Nearly all pyromaniacs are male. Pyromania may begin in childhood, but there is no conclusive data regarding the typical age of onset. Similarly, there is no documented link between fire-setting in childhood and adult pyromania.

See also Impulse control disorders

Further Reading
Qualitative methods
Research methods that emphasize detailed, personal descriptions of phenomena.

Research psychologists can collect two kinds of information: quantitative data and qualitative data. Quantitative data are often represented numerically in the form of means, percentages, or frequency counts. Such data are often referred to as “measurement” data, referring to the fact that we often like to measure the amount or extent of some behavior, trait, or disposition. For example, shyness, test anxiety, and depression can all be appraised by means of paper-and-pencil tests which yield numerical scores representing the extent of shyness, anxiety, etc. that resides in the individual taking the test. A psychologist interested in the relationship between test anxiety and grade point average would collect the appropriate quantitative information on each of these two variables and conduct statistical tests that would reveal the strength (or absence) of the relationship.

The term “qualitative research methods” refers to a variety of ways of collecting information that is less amenable to quantification and statistical manipulation. Qualitative methods differ from quantitative methods largely because their ultimate purpose is different. The goal of qualitative research is to arrive at some general, overall appreciation of a phenomenon—highlighting interesting aspects and perhaps generating specific hypotheses. In contrast, quantitative research is typically designed to test relatively specific predictions. Qualitative research thus provides an initial description of a phenomenon, whereas quantitative research aims to investigate its various details. Some examples of qualitative methods include focus groups, surveys, naturalistic observations, interviews, content analyses of archival material, and case studies. What these approaches share is an emphasis on revealing some general pattern by observing a few particular cases.

Focus groups are commonly used by marketing or advertising agencies to derive information about people’s reactions to a particular product or event. A small number of people, often fewer than 10, are asked their opinions. A focus group engaged by the marketing department of a breakfast cereal company, for example, might be asked how appealing the cereal looks, whether the box would make them consider buying it, and how agreeable the cereal’s texture and taste were. A facilitator would encourage the participants to share their opinions and reactions in the context of a group discussion. The session would be taped and transcribed. Researchers would then use the information to make their product more appealing. Naturalistic observations involve studying individuals in their natural environments. One common variant consists of participant observation research in which the researcher, in order to understand it, becomes part of a particular group. George Kirkham was a criminologist who took a year off from his university position to work as a police patrolman. He then wrote about the changes in his attitudes and values that occurred when he worked in a high-crime neighborhood.

There are several drawbacks to qualitative methods of inquiry. Firstly, the results are always subject to personal biases. A person who is interviewed, for example, is stating their version of the truth. Personal perspectives invariably affect what the individual believes and understands. Similarly, the results reported by the researcher conducting a naturalistic observation will be tainted by that researcher’s individual interpretation of the events. Further, while case studies are rich sources of information about individuals, it is risky to assume that the information can be generalized to the rest of the population. Moreover, analyzing the data from qualitative research can be difficult, since open-ended questions and naturalistic observation leave room for so much variability between individuals that comparisons are difficult. Finally, although it may be tempting for researchers to infer cause and effect relationships from the results of naturalistic observations, interviews, archival data and case