

OPERANT CONDITIONING

B.F. Skinner

By the 1920s **John B. Watson** had left academic psychology and other behaviorists were becoming influential, proposing new forms of learning other than classical conditioning.

Perhaps the most important of these was **Burrhus Frederic Skinner**. Although, for obvious reasons he is more commonly known as B.F. Skinner.

Skinner's views were slightly less extreme than those of Watson. Skinner believed that we do have such a thing as a mind, but that it is simply more productive to study observable behavior rather than internal mental events.

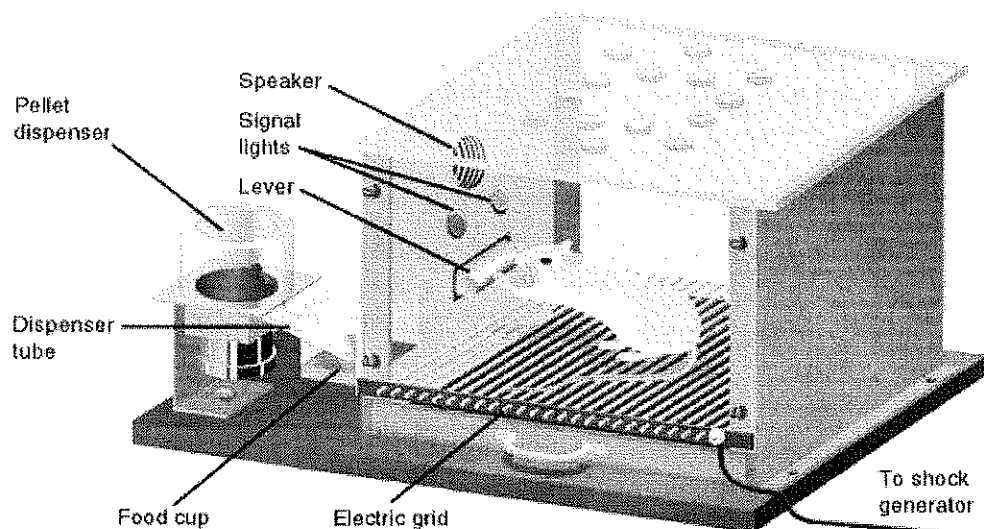
Skinner believed that the best way to understand behavior is to look at the causes of an action and its consequences. He called this approach operant conditioning.

Skinner's theory of operant conditioning was based on the work of **Thorndike** (1905). Edward Thorndike studied learning in animals using a puzzle box to propose the theory known as the 'Law of Effect'.

Skinner is regarded as the father of Operant Conditioning, but his work was based on Thorndike's law of effect. Skinner introduced a new term into the Law of Effect - **Reinforcement**.

Behavior which is reinforced tends to be repeated (i.e. strengthened); behavior which is not reinforced tends to die out-or be extinguished (i.e. weakened).

Skinner (1948) studied operant conditioning by conducting experiments using animals which he placed in a "*Skinner Box*" which was similar to Thorndike's puzzle box.



B.F. Skinner (1938) coined the term operant conditioning- *it means roughly changing of behavior by the use of reinforcement which is given after the desired response.*

Skinner identified three types of responses or operant that can follow behavior.

• **Neutral Operants:**

responses from the environment that neither increase nor decrease the probability of a behavior being repeated.

• **Reinforcers:**

Responses from the environment that increase the probability of a behavior being repeated. Reinforcers can be either positive or negative.

• **Punishers:**

Response from the environment that decrease the likelihood of a behavior being repeated. Punishment weakens behavior.

NEGATIVE

REINFORCEMENT
behavior is strengthened

aversive stimulus removed

stimulus

NEGATIVE

PUNISHMENT
behavior is weakened

pleasant stimulus removed

POSITIVE

REINFORCEMENT
behavior is strengthened

pleasant stimulus added

POSITIVE

PUNISHMENT
behavior is weakened

aversive stimulus added

behavior

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