

Both Ends of the Leash

Words at Work:

Learning terms like
“positive punishment” can be
positively punishing

Patricia B. McConnell



Here's a familiar scenario: You're talking to a woman about a problem she's having with her dog, and she says something like, “All my friends are telling me I should use negative reinforcement and kick Chief in the stomach for jumping up, but that just seems to mean.” If you're a professional trainer, you're left trying to figure out how a kick in the stomach could be described as “negative reinforcement,” and then you realize that – of course! – she meant “positive punishment.” If you're a dog lover who is not steeped in B.F. Skinner's research on learning and current psychology-speak, you might have said the above sentence yourself.

The truth is that many people misuse the terms associated with operant conditioning. And no wonder. The terms used to describe the four quadrants of operant conditioning – positive and negative reinforcement, positive and negative punishment – are hard to learn. Like riding a bicycle, once you've figured them out, it doesn't seem all that difficult, but getting there requires the intellectual equivalent of skinned knees. When I mention to other trainers how hard it can be to sort out “negative reinforcement” from “positive punishment,” I hear what can only be described as relieved laughter.

So there, I'm saying it now. The emperor has no clothes, and the terms used to describe operant conditioning are a pain in the butt to get straight. With apologies to Uncle Skinner, here are some suggestions for sorting them out.

The problem isn't with the terms “reinforcement” or “punishment.” It makes sense for reinforcement to

signify something that increases the frequency of a behavior, and for punishment to be something that decreases it. It's not hard to label chunks of organic chicken, liberally handed out at the right time, as reinforcements. And it makes sense that correcting a dog with a choke collar every time he growls at a stranger is “punishment” that will decrease the number of times he growls at the UPS man, for example. (Of course, it won't make him any less afraid of strangers and might make him more likely to bite, but that's for another column.)

It's when you add “positive” and “negative” into the mix that the brain begins to cramp. What's logical about labeling a collar correction (or a beating, for that matter) as positive, as in “positive punishment”? I know, I know, “positive” signifies that something is being added to either increase or decrease the frequency of a response and “negative” means that something is being taken away. But whose mind works that way? When you hear positive, don't you think “good”? The dictionary says that positive means “confident, optimistic and focusing on good things” or “producing good results.” No wonder it's hard to master these terms as used in the psychology of learning.

Ironically, it's psychology itself that explains why it's so hard for us to make the link between “positive punishment” and what it really means. If Pavlov had been involved in creating the terms for operant conditioning, he would have reminded us that we are all classically conditioned to think “good” when we hear “positive” and think “bad” when we hear “negative.” Of course, positive punishment isn't

always something bad in the sense of hurtful or scary. For example, patting a dog on top of the head when he does a difficult recall is a great example of positive punishment. You're adding something to the system – patting the dog on the head – and because most dogs don't enjoy it, they'll be less likely to come when called the next time. Nonetheless, it's hard to associate the word positive with something one's dog doesn't like.

Perhaps we should create a new lexicon that helps people understand the four types of operant conditioning. I'm not suggesting that we completely replace the standard terms with something else. It's too late for that, and the fact is that if people are serious about understanding and using reinforcement and punishment, they need to be serious about wading through the terminology. However, why not help them out? Anything less seems to be the intellectual equivalent of “Nee-nee-boo-boo, I know something you don't know!”

Here are my suggestions for a new set of terms to help categorize operant conditioning.

For positive reinforcement, how about “Add/Increase”? That makes it clear that you're adding something to increase the frequency of a behavior. (Alternate: “Yippy-skippy!”)

For negative reinforcement, we could say “Withdraw/Increase” to remind ourselves that in this case, something is being taken away to increase a behavior. (Or, we could go with my personal favorite: “Get out of the rain, you idiot!”)

Symmetrically, positive punishment could also be called “Add/Decrease,” because something is being added to decrease the frequency of a behavior (also known as “You'll be sorry.”)

And, last but not least, why don't we think of negative punishment as “Withdraw/Decrease,” since we're taking away something to decrease a behavior (or, “Too bad! I get to eat the cheese but you don't, 'cuz you didn't sit when I asked you to!).

These are just suggestions – you might be better off making up your own. But either way, don't worry if learning the original terms feels unwieldy. Punishing though it may be, I'm positive that the negatives of learning a new jargon will be ultimately reinforcing.

1 The best resource for learning more about operant conditioning and the real meaning of its terminology is, without question, Pamela Reid's book *EXCEL-ERated Learning*

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