

Learning Theory

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

Today's lesson will discuss behavioral learning theory, which is a little bit different from a lot of the other theories in regards to personality. Behavioral theories, if you recall, stress the importance of learning and external forces on behavior. This tutorial will discuss:

1. Drive
2. Cue
3. Response and Reward
4. External Force

1. Drive

Learning theory describes personality, not as traits, or internal constructs within our mind, but rather the interaction of external forces on our internal responses. Under learning theory, what we call personality is considered rather a collection of learned patterns of behaviors or **habits**, as we would call them.

In order to see how this relates to personality, let's explore how a habit is formed. First, within the environment, there is some **drive** or desire that motivates a person to act.

You might be angry, or experience fear and those emotions motivate you to act in response to things that are going on in your environment. These are learned patterns.



TERMS TO KNOW

Habit

Learned patterns of behavior coming from drives, cues, responses, and consequences (rewards and punishments)

Drive

Any stimulus that impels a person into action

2. Cue

A **cue** is something that a person notices within the environment that influences and encourages a type of

action. The presence or absence of something in the environment may lead to actions by the person.



TERM TO KNOW

Cue

Environmental signals that direct different responses

3. Response and Reward

The third element of the learning theory is response. This is the person's behavior or action, which is caused by the drive and the cue working together.

The final element is **reward**. The reward is something positive that a person gets because of the response they have.

➤ **EXAMPLE** You might get candy or attention for a type of behavior exhibited, and these rewards might encourage further responses of the same type.

Of course, there can also be something negative that a person gets because of the response they have. That is **punishment**.

IN CONTEXT

Suppose you see a bear within the environment, and rightfully, you feel some kind of fear. This fear is your drive in this situation. Now, you can run, you can fight, or you could play dead as different kinds of responses. These are all the different things you can do.

Cues within the environment will help you navigate and decide which response to choose. If a child is present, for example, then you will likely not choose to run, because you don't want to leave a child behind.

Or, perhaps the type of bear within the environment causes you to choose different kinds of responses. For example, you might run or play dead because of the type of bear and its demeanor. The reward is that you get to live, which is a pretty good reward.

If you choose correctly and you get the reward, you're more likely to choose that response later on. If you choose incorrectly, then you would change your response the next time you're in a similar situation and hopefully get it right this time. Hopefully, you would never encounter another bear in your lifetime, but you understand the underlying idea here. If a choice rewards you, you're likely to make that choice again in a similar situation.



TERMS TO KNOW

Reward

Positive consequence that increases the likelihood of a behavior occurring again

Punishment

4. External Force

Behavioral learning theories are important because they stress how situations can affect behaviors, given different external cues. A lot of other theories focus on the internal processes more specifically and focus less on how the environment can affect the display of personality.

Even if a person is kind or compassionate, situations may cause this person to *not* act that way.

IN CONTEXT

There is a famous series of experiments, the Good Samaritan experiments which were done by psychologists Darley and Batson in 1973.

These two psychologists asked a group of people to give a talk to a crowd within a different building. They had to move from one building to the other, and while they were moving from one building to the other, there was a person that was laying on the ground that clearly needed some help. This person was part of the experiment.

Some of the people that were going to the other building were in a hurry. In other words, they only had a short period of time before their talk. Those people were far less likely to stop and help the person that was in trouble, even if they were cued to be thinking in these compassionate kinds of ways.

They were actually giving talks on a Good Samaritan story and on altruism. So, even though they were being cued for the traits of compassion, they were still affected by the hurriedness of the situation and did not to react in a compassionate way.

A good middle ground to think of behavioral theory and trait theory is what we call **trait situation interaction**, which is where our environment affects the expression of different personality traits. In this context, both of them work in conjunction.

➤ **EXAMPLE** Shyness may be a trait that a person has, meaning that they often act introverted in many ways. Social situations that make them feel anxiety are what cue the response to shyness as a trait. So, shyness is the trait, but the social situation actually causes the person to express the trait.

If a person is not in a social situation, they would not seem shy. **Social anxiety** is the feeling of anxiety when a person is around other people. In other words, it's the drive that a person with shyness has for the expression or the response of shyness within those social situations.



TERMS TO KNOW

Trait Situation Interaction

Traits are not good predictors of behavior because the environment may have a bigger impact

Social Anxiety

Tend to be nervous around other people and more comfortable alone



SUMMARY

As a recap, learning theory describes personality as the interaction of **external forces** on our internal responses. **Drive** is something that impels a person to action, whereas **cue** is an external signal to bring about a **response** (actions or behavior). When positive consequences occur, it's called a **reward** and it increases the likelihood of a behavior occurring again.

Good luck!

Source: This work is adapted from sophia learning author Erik Taggart.



TERMS TO KNOW

Cue

Environmental signals that direct different responses.

Drive

Any stimulus that impels a person into action.

Habits

Learned patterns of behavior coming from drives, cues, responses, and consequences (rewards and punishments).

Punishment

Negative consequence that decreases the likelihood of a behavior occurring again.

Response

Actions or behavior.

Reward

Positive consequence that increases the likelihood of a behavior occurring again.

Social Anxiety

Tend to be nervous around other people and more comfortable alone.

Trait Situation Interaction

Traits are not good predictors of behavior because the environment may have a bigger impact.