Traditional Training vs. Operant Training

Eugene Talsma

Behavioral principles

My first and immediate thought upon reading the subject of this issue was to recall Charlie Ferster's 1967 article, in *Psychological Record*, about his experience/observations at a children's treatment center.

Ferster observed and took notes of the director working with a child. She was known as “an especially gifted therapist,” but she could not convey her procedures to others; and they could not seem to learn by simply observing her. The therapist expressed amazement at Ferster's close description of her work with the child. As a result of Ferster's observations she also learned some technical language about what she was doing with the child. She then could explain “little step-by-step procedures so that people don't look blindly at me with awe.” She added, “I am able to see tiny little steps and explain much better what I am doing with the children, so the magic is out of Linwood—which is wonderful.”

I think this wonderful article applies to the subject at hand. I have spent most of my working life dealing with human behavior. Initially I took a traditional approach. Then I saw the light, i.e. read/studied Skinner. I spent the last 30 years or so with an ABA behavioral approach. Much of my “off-work” life included the world of dogs, dog shows etc., from whence comes the interest in animal behavior.

Traditional and operant trainers in the dog world

By direct observation and reading dog world literature one can get a fairly good view of existing training. There are some very good dog trainers out there, but most are like the therapist of Ferster's observations. They have limited ways of articulating their how-to-do-it. Most operant trainers seem to have a better grasp of the scientific fundamentals of behavioral laws. For example traditionalists have only a vague knowledge and appreciation of shaping (come to think of it, some operants are a bit lacking here also). There is also an apparent misunderstanding of intermittent reinforcement in traditional handling (witness the never-ending baiting that takes place in the conformation ring *ad nauseam*!)

Traditionalists seem to have “laws” that have been made up according to some vague rationale. That is something like the state of the situation in my own early experiences as a psychologist. Some vague internal conditions were the basis for all kinds of explanatory causations. When one ran across a particularly difficult problem or situation it was often necessary, as well as convenient, to create a new and different set of vague and specious elements. We always found it enjoyable in those cases to have a staff member whose background included a heavy portion of English Lit; better yet a course in creative writing. Perhaps something similar may be found in writings by traditional trainers. They do seem to make up a bunch of things in explanation of their “techniques”!

Use of punishment

Another difference, I believe, is in the use of punishment or aversive procedures; traditionalists appear to use these more frequently than operant folks. Both in life and in training instructions, “corrections”
dog trainers term for punishment usually in the form of a sharp yank on the leash: Ed.] have made me cringe more often than I care to remember; and I have never seen a dog that liked “corrections”!

I believe that all learning takes place within the framework of the laws of behavior as articulated in the field of operant conditioning. Hence when learning occurs as the result of training it results from operant procedures. These may be the training procedures of either traditional or operant trainers. The operant trainers, however, are more precise, deliberate, and consistent than most, if not all, traditionalists. But the “laws” are the same for either practitioner.

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