

PERSONALITY FACTORS IN CONDITIONING: AN INTRODUCTORY NOTE TO TWO PAPERS

H. J. EYSENCK

Institute of Psychiatry, University of London

It is a policy of this journal to accept articles reporting work done on animals provided that the theoretical points in question are such as to bear on the main problems and areas which the journal deals with. The two papers by R. D. Savage, and by P. L. Broadhurst and G. Bagnami, may call for a brief comment to explain why they are relevant in this connexion.

Most behaviour therapists accept the proposition that neurotic symptoms, so called, are acquired through a process of conditioning (Eysenck and Rachman, 1964). It is also believed by some that individual differences in conditionability are important in predisposing certain people to the development of neurotic illness or to the manifestation of criminal tendencies (Eysenck, 1964). There is much evidence to link relative speed and ease of conditioning with certain personality variables, and there appear to be two main theories. Spence (1964) has suggested that persons high on neuroticism (or manifest anxiety as he prefers to call it) condition better than subjects low on this variable, and Eysenck (1957) has suggested that introverts condition better than extraverts. There is a great deal of evidence both for and against either of these hypotheses and it must of course also be noted that they are not necessarily antithetical (Eysenck, 1965). Neuroticism and introversion are orthogonal dimensions of personality and it is perfectly possible that both are correlated with a high degree of conditionability, thus making dysthymics (i.e. neurotic introverts) the most easily conditioned group of all.

The final answer to the problems raised by these two theories must of course be looked for in the human field, but it would seem that animal studies can at least give some hints on the likely outcome, and on the parameters which are important in relating one or the other of these personality dimensions to conditioning. One such study has already been published (Eysenck, 1963), and the two studies presented here may be looked at from the same point of view. It should be emphasized of course that they are of considerable value in their own right and that the facts reported need not be interpreted in terms of their relevance to this theoretical discussion at all; nevertheless it is the purpose of this note to draw attention to the interesting manner in which they complement each other in supporting the view that conditioning in rate is essentially independent of neuroticism/emotionality.

In the first paper Broadhurst and Bagnami examine the scores on a test of emotionality of rats bred for high and low avoidance conditioning respectively and demonstrate that there appears to be little if any difference in emotionality between the two strains. This would seem to contradict some earlier findings in which the avoidance conditioning behaviour of rats which had been bred for high and low emotionality respectively had been examined, and where it had been found that the emotional animals had conditioning scores significantly different from those of the non-emotional. Savage in his paper demonstrates

that there may be no real contradiction here because when the scores of emotional and non-emotional rats on an avoidance conditioning task are examined separately for point of origin and slope it can be shown that they differ with respect to the point of origin but not with respect to the slope of the learning curves, which of course is the proper measure of the conditioning that has taken place.

As far as these data go then they seem to demonstrate independence of avoidance conditioning from individual differences in emotionality. The results should not of course be over-interpreted; we are dealing only with one particular type of conditioning, under one particular set of experimental parameters, and it is not known whether results can be generalized to other types of conditioning, or would remain invariant under change of parameter. It is to be hoped that further work will in the near future carry forward this type of investigation and clarify the situation even further.

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