

Negative Re-enforcement and Punishment

Negative Re-enforcement

Negative reinforcement is activity designed to prevent an undesired behaviour by depriving the offender of a supposedly desired outcome, but which in fact, incurs the opposite result. Instead of decreasing the likelihood of the behaviour as intended, removing the item actually supports the behaviour and increases the chances of it occurring again.

An example of negative reinforcement is a team of rowers going to the lakes for the championship titles. Jack is found to have taken performance enhancing drugs, so he is excluded from going.

Jack, however, is glad, as he does not like the lakes area anyway, and was looking for an excuse to back out. Excluding Jack from the team was meant to teach him a lesson, but it negatively reinforced Jack's behaviour by giving him the outcome he wanted.

An example of a positive item that becomes a negative reinforcement would be if the school at which Sally worked decided that teachers who did not meet performance criteria would have to do extra work during the school holidays. This was meant to be a deterrent against slack performance.

When Sally performed badly, she was given an extra two week's work, with the intention it would deter her from performing badly again. Sally, however, welcomed the work as she was bored during the holidays and wanted something to do. She decided she would perform below par again next year.

Punishment

Punishment, like negative reinforcement, is intended to prevent an undesired activity. But unlike negative reinforcement, the punishment is not something that the recipient enjoys. This does not necessarily mean that it stops the undesired behaviour, although it could do.

An example would be where Tim is fined his pocket money for swearing. Tim doesn't like missing out on his pocket money so he learns to stop swearing. In this instance, the punishment has worked.

Punishment, however, does not always work in the long-term. The undesired behaviour could return. What if, for example, after a while, Tim is continually fined for swearing and gets fed up of being without money? So, he gets a part-time job and earns his own money.

He has his own resources and so being fined is no big deal. He can manage without his pocket money and so he resumes swearing. In fact, he takes every opportunity to swear, and swears even more than before he was first punished. The long-term outcome of Tim's being punished was that his undesired behaviour returned and then increased.

Summary

In the case of negative reinforcement, an undesired behaviour is intended to be eliminated by removing a supposed 'reward,' but the offender is actually reinforced by the removal of the item, as it wasn't something he wanted anyway (as in the earlier example of Jack and the rowing).

In the case of punishment, the undesired behaviour fails to be completely extinguished and returns, because, although the punishment does not reinforce the offender, it eventually becomes non-efficacious, as in the above example of Tim. The above outcomes of negative re-enforcement and punishment are not inevitable, but in some cases could be very likely.