

Secondary Reinforcement

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Secondary Reinforcement

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Psychology (Behaviorism, Operant Conditioning)

1. Core Definition

Secondary Reinforcement, often referred to as ****conditioned reinforcement****, is a foundational concept within the study of learning, particularly within the framework of B.F. Skinner's operant conditioning. This mechanism describes how a previously neutral stimulus acquires the power to strengthen or reinforce a subsequent behavior. This acquisition occurs because the neutral stimulus has been consistently and reliably paired with an already established ****primary reinforcer**** or an existing, powerful secondary reinforcer. Unlike primary reinforcers, which inherently satisfy biological or survival needs--such as food, water, or relief from pain--a secondary reinforcer holds no intrinsic value to the organism. Its reinforcing efficacy is entirely dependent upon its learned association with the primary reward.

The conditioning process typically involves pairing a neutral stimulus (like the sound of a bell or a specific color) with a primary reinforcer (like a food pellet). After repeated pairings, the organism learns to anticipate the primary reward upon the presentation of the neutral stimulus. Consequently, the neutral stimulus transforms into a conditioned stimulus that itself functions as a positive reinforcer. Any behavior that reliably results in the appearance of this newly conditioned stimulus will increase in frequency, even if the primary reinforcer is not immediately present. This learning mechanism is crucial for bridging the time gap between a desired action and the eventual biological reward, enabling the formation of complex behavioral chains.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The conceptual roots of conditioned reinforcement stem from early behavioral research, particularly the principles established in classical conditioning by Ivan Pavlov. Pavlov demonstrated that neutral stimuli could become powerful signals through association. However, the formal articulation and systematic application of secondary reinforcement as a means of shaping voluntary behavior is attributed to B.F. Skinner. Skinner's research on operant chambers (Skinner boxes) illustrated that animals could be successfully trained and maintained in complex tasks by using conditioned stimuli--such as lights, clicks, or tokens--as intermediate rewards.

Historically, the development of this concept allowed behaviorists to explain human motivations that seemed detached from immediate biological necessities. Since humans rarely receive direct primary reinforcement for daily activities (e.g., getting a paycheck is not equivalent to immediately eating a meal), the concept of secondary reinforcement provided the necessary framework to understand how abstract goals, social approval, and monetary rewards maintain consistent, long-term behavior. The power of secondary reinforcers revolutionized the application of behavioral

principles in clinical and educational settings, leading to the development of structured behavioral modification programs.

3. Key Characteristics

Acquired Value: Secondary reinforcers are not innate; their power must be **learned** through consistent pairing with an unconditioned (primary) reinforcer. This makes them highly flexible and variable across different species or cultural contexts.

Dependence on Primary Reinforcement: The effectiveness of a secondary reinforcer is not permanent. If the association between the secondary stimulus and the primary reward is broken--meaning the secondary reinforcer no longer reliably leads to the primary one--the secondary reinforcer will eventually lose its power through the process of extinction. It must be periodically "backed up" or renewed by the primary reward to maintain its reinforcing strength.

Generalized Secondary Reinforcement: A particularly potent subtype of secondary reinforcer is the **generalized secondary reinforcer**. This stimulus has been associated with multiple different primary reinforcers. Examples include social approval, praise, or money. Because these generalized reinforcers can satisfy many needs, their value is less susceptible to the satiation of any single primary need, making them extremely powerful motivators in complex environments.

Arbitrary Nature: Any initially neutral stimulus--a sound, a flash of light, a piece of plastic, or a specific word--can potentially become a secondary reinforcer, provided it is consistently paired with a primary reward.

4. Applications and Examples

The most pervasive and easily understood example of a secondary reinforcer in modern life is **money**. Money, in itself, has no inherent survival value; if an individual were isolated on a deserted island, cash or gold would not alleviate hunger or thirst. However, in society, money is constantly paired with the ability to acquire food, shelter, comfort, and security--all of which are primary reinforcers. Therefore, the ability to earn money acts as a profoundly effective secondary reinforcer, motivating complex and often arduous behaviors such as commuting, working long hours, or pursuing higher education. The reinforcement occurs through the learned potential for exchange.

In clinical and educational settings, the principle of secondary reinforcement is formalized through **token economies**. In a classroom or therapeutic environment, tokens, stickers, or points (the neutral, soon-to-be secondary reinforcers) are immediately given following desired behaviors. These tokens are then accumulated and can later be exchanged for access to highly desired items, activities, or privileges (the primary reinforcers or highly preferred secondary reinforcers). The immediate delivery of the token provides quick, tangible feedback that helps shape behavior effectively, while the final exchange maintains the learned value of the token.

5. Significance and Impact

Secondary reinforcement is perhaps the single most critical concept for explaining the learning and maintenance of complex human and animal behavior in environments where primary rewards are scarce or delayed. Without conditioned reinforcement, organisms would only be able to learn behaviors that yield immediate biological gratification. This mechanism allows for the successful completion of **behavior chains** that may last hours, days, or even years, such as earning a professional certification or completing a major project.

Furthermore, secondary reinforcement is essential for the structure of social interaction. Human communication and relationships are heavily mediated by generalized secondary reinforcers, such as **social approval**, attention, praise, and status symbols. These abstract rewards dictate much of our social behavior, allowing for cooperation and adherence to social norms, even when such behaviors do not directly or immediately benefit biological survival. The creation of such powerfully reinforcing, yet arbitrary, stimuli vastly expands the adaptive capacity of organisms.

6. Debates and Criticisms

While the phenomenon of conditioned reinforcement is rarely disputed empirically, debates often center on the cognitive processes involved. Strict behaviorists maintain that the secondary stimulus functions purely as an eliciting cue, substituting the primary reinforcer through association. However, cognitive psychologists argue that the secondary reinforcer serves a more complex role as an **informational signal**. Under this view, the stimulus provides the organism with crucial information about the environment, specifically indicating that a goal state is accessible or that the necessary steps toward achieving the ultimate reward are being completed.

Another area of discussion involves the limits of secondary reinforcement, particularly the rate at which extinction occurs if the association is not periodically renewed. The general consensus is that generalized secondary reinforcers, due to their association with multiple primary rewards, are highly resistant to extinction. However, specific, non-generalized secondary reinforcers can lose their effectiveness rapidly if the contingency between the conditioned stimulus and the primary reinforcer is systematically broken, highlighting the fragility of their learned value.

Further Reading

[Operant Conditioning \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Primary Reinforcer \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[B.F. Skinner \(Wikipedia\)](#)