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THE POWER OF NEGLECT

Unlike the rich imagery of Freudian psychology, the significant principles of learning have failed to filter into popular thinking. And yet the power of this ignorance continues to control behaviour.

The emphasis in learning theory has been on a perspective in which a neutral state is manipulated by positive or negative reinforcement in order to produce approach or avoidance behaviour. If we switch momentarily this figure/ground and consider the effects of the 'neutral state' I think we can identify an equally potent influence, particularly in social interaction behaviour.

It is easy for individuals to get into a pattern of negative feedback. How many institutions, organizations or systems work on the principle "If you don't hear from us, you're doing a fine job?" How common is it for a mother to ignore her son's washing before dinner five nights in a row, but jump on him for not washing on the sixth? We take people for granted. It is no wonder that young married couples experience a Did-I-make-the-right-choice type of disillusionment when their extra efforts fail to achieve the former appreciation. This taking for granted fits a fine extinction curve. We'll stop doing those things which cease to be rewarding. Thus the 'neutral state', the absence of reinforcer, becomes a powerful force in changing behaviour.

The reason for singling out extinction is to draw attention to its subtlety. Extinction is a form of behaviour control we all have in our hands but rarely have in our awareness. An elementary school teacher may on occasion ignore certain disruptive behaviour in class in hopes that it will disappear, but how many individuals are aware of the desirable behaviour which will also disappear if taken for granted? To be taken for granted, to be denied feedback on desired behaviour, is to have one's identity threatened—it is to say, "I do not acknowledge those adequate and desirable aspects of your behaviour!"

The dramatic pay-offs of reinforcing rather than extinguishing desirable behaviour are well-known to full-functioning individuals who incorporate this behaviour into their repertoire automatically. The effects are most startling to those individuals who are dissatisfied with their social interaction abilities. In counselling individuals with these dissatisfactions, articulation of how they feel in a given encounter and how they express their feelings in that situation often reveals a discrepancy. They may well extinguish the responses they hope for by taking them for granted. More awareness of the power of neglect may be useful insight for the counsellor as well as the counsellee in shaping satisfying relationships.