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Asymmetry Between Loss and Gain and its Relation to Experiential Avoidance: An Analysis of Five Empirical Studies

Patrícia Luque Carreiro IBAC **Carlos Eduardo Costa** UEL

1. Introduction

Punishment (loss) does not simply function as the negative mirror image of reinforcement. It has its own functional properties that structurally resemble what is clinically described as experiential avoidance.

Experiential avoidance is a core process in human psychological suffering, characterized by rigid patterns of behavior aimed at minimizing contact with uncomfortable private events.

2. Objectives

1. Evaluate the functional asymmetry between reinforcement (gains) and punishment (losses)
2. Identify the behavioral mechanisms of suppression operating in the presence of punishers (or aversive events)
3. Discuss how the disproportionate regulatory control of losses supports the rigidity seen in experiential avoidance.

3. Method

Design

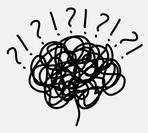
Narrative comparative review of five key studies

Sample

Critchfield et al., 2003
Rasmussen & Newland, 2008
Pietras et al., 2010
Kubanek et al., 2015
Kuroda et al., 2018

4. Results

Behavioral Sensitivity



Losses weigh more heavily than equivalent gains in controlling behavior.

Kuroda et al., 2018; Rasmussen & Newland, 2008

Rasmussen & Newland (2008) and Kuroda et al. (2018) show that usually losses weigh more heavily than equivalent gains in controlling behavior, although individual differences may be present. Rasmussen & Newland (2008) identified a 3-fold bias toward unpunished alternatives, which means that “a penny lost is 3 times more potent than a penny earned”. Kuroda et al. (2018) noted that while sensitivity generally remained low in their study (undermatching), it did not change as systematically as in Rasmussen's. In all five studies, participants tend to prefer alternatives or components in which punishment is not present, even when the net gains are equal.

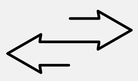
Direct- or competitive-supression model of punishment

Under punishment, the organism becomes less responsive to positive-reinforcement contingencies present in the environment.

Critchfield et al., 2003

Critchfield et al. (2003) establish a formal basis explaining why punishment reduces sensitivity to available reinforcement. By comparing direct vs competitive supression, the authors noticed that punishment substracts value directly from the punished response, instead of strengthening the competitive alternative.

The "Flat" Penalty Effect



Punishment produces categorical, all-or-nothing avoidance, independent of the actual magnitude of the threat.

Kubanek et al., 2015

Kubanek et al. (2015) show that while subjects repeat choices more often as rewards increase, they avoid previously punished choices at a constant rate regardless of whether the loss is big or small.

Effect of loss or reduced net gains by yoking

The contingent relationship of the loss (positive punishment) is the primary driver of suppression.

Pietras et al., 2010

By using Yoked Punishment (independent losses) and Yoked Reinforcement (matched net earnings), Pietras et al. (2010) showed that the effect of punishment goes beyond the simple net loss of reinforcement. There is an aversive component of the contingency itself that suppresses behavior.

Individual Differences

The functional value of losses varies by individual.

Critchfield et al., 2003; Kuroda et al., 2018

Kuroda et al. (2018) and Critchfield et al. (2003) both highlight that the functional value of consequences varies by individual. In Kuroda's study, one participant's behavior was perfectly symmetrical, while others showed a much stronger reaction to punishment, which is typical in human research due to experimental history.

5. Discussion

Conecting to Experiential Avoidance: Losses exert a disproportionate regulatory control over human behavior

Psychological Weight

Losses outweigh equivalent gains. Punishment controls behavior disproportionately more strongly than reinforcement of the same magnitude (up to 3x). **It may explain why aversive private events dominate the life of an individual in suffering.**

Behavioral Rigidity

Avoidance is categorical, not graded. Any aversive signal triggers "all-or-nothing" avoidance, regardless of the actual magnitude of the threat. The flat nature of punishment (where even small losses trigger similar avoidance) may explain the difficulty in shifting rigid patterns in experiential avoidance.

Suppression Mechanism

Avoidance reduces sensitivity to available positive reinforcement. The support for direct suppression suggests that punishers subtract functional value from available actions, narrowing the individual’s repertoire. Under punishment, behavior becomes less responsive to gain contingencies present in the environment, even when they remain accessible.

6. Contact

Get in touch

patricialuque@hotmail.com
@patricialuquepsicologia