

Conditioned Responses to the Ringing of a Bell

From my observations prior to becoming a bell-ringer for the Salvation Army, I had noted that people generally responded in one of two ways to seeing such a bell-ringer. One way was to ignore the bell-ringer with such completeness, i.e. avoiding looking in even their general direction, setting a fixed, mask-like expression on their face, giving wide-berth to the bell-ringer, etc., that it could only have been through conscious effort. I'll grant that they all may have been deaf, hard of sight and so incredibly wrapped up in their own private world that they could so totally avoid being aware of the ringer, but Occam's razor suggests we be wary of that belief. The other prime response was acknowledging the bell-ringer in friendly manner, a smile and a nod, a "merry-Christmas" or somesuch, and occasionally, though not always, some money. There were other, rarer responses that I was not aware of until I actually took up the bell myself that I will cover later.

Knowing that most people had a conditioned response to the external stimuli of seeing a Salvation Army bell-ringer, I decided to make the external stimuli of *me* ringing the bell new, fresh and unique in an effort to break from the standard response and force a new one. I wanted to get real ingenuous reactions, not tried and true learned responses.

Unfortunately, I did not know very much about Pavlov's stimulus-reaction experiments. Pavlov discovered that a dog conditioned to the sound of a bell would also salivate to the sound of a different bell or of a buzzer, this phenomenon is called stimulus generalization (Pavlov). Stimulus generalization simply means that once something has learned to respond to a certain stimulus, it tends to react that way to similar stimuli. Wrapping one arm of my coat and a Santa

hat in battery operated Christmas lights was just not enough differentiation, for I was still just a person standing in front of a red kettle ringing a bell. My stimulus was too similar to the stimulus that the people of this city have grown up with; it prompted nearly no new responses.

I couldn't help feeling a little put out by the people who completely ignored me, after all, I was merely wishing that they have happy holidays. I was not asking anything of them nor (as I at first believed) soliciting anything. I felt I was being treated the way panhandlers are: don't make eye contact because you'll invite them into your world. I personally couldn't have cared less whether anyone put any money into the kettle, I was just adding to the holiday atmosphere by dressing jovially and wishing jovial wishes on complete strangers. I felt I was getting a most undeserved response by being rigidly ignored.

And then there was a small number of people who actually responded, but in a negative way, which quite surprised me. I had not expected such reactions, and did not know what to do when I received them. About ten individuals seemed to feel genuinely guilty about not giving *me* money; they were afraid I would judge them and they dreaded it. Instead of saying "season's greetings" back to me, they stopped, leaned in conspiratorially and let me know that they had "already donated this year" or "I always send in a check at this time of year, so..." or "Oh, I gave a lot of money the other day" and various other variations. I find it curious that they didn't feel guilty at having not given (though they may have been lying, and so maybe that is what they felt) but they seemed to be feeling guilty about having *already* given.

As the nights wore on, I eventually began to feel as if I were soliciting something. When I had started, I had felt that I was merely volunteering to ring a bell, with no further implications. I was just a part of the holiday scenery. When Christmas time comes around you see lights, pine trees, Santas, and Salvation Army bell ringers. The reactions I received from people caused me

to perceive myself in a new light. When the majority of people who returned my greeting, but did not donate any money, apologized or offered a quick explanation in an apologetic tone I couldn't help but get the impression that they thought I expected something of them, and that they felt guilty in some way. I was strongly reminded of my days as a door to door salesman. Having my self-image changed from that of a holiday-well-wisher to that of a salesman was a bit of a downer.

These obvious displays of guilt lead me to wonder why so many would fanatically ignore me. Could it be because they too felt guilty about not giving, and wanted to avoid facing the source of their disease? It is interesting to note that if it is normal for a person to feel guilt if they do not donate money, then those who do donate money may be simply performing operant avoidance. Operant avoidance occurs when an organism chooses to act on its environment in order to avoid a punishment or negative feeling (Skinner). Thus, those who give money do not do so in order to help others, but in order to avoid a painful sense of guilt. Their primary desire is to maintain their happiness, not to increase another's happiness. "Of the voluntary acts of every man, the object is some good to himself" (Hobbes 105).

Another negative response, about as common as feeling guilty about having already given, was directed specifically at me. Several people jumped to the conclusion that I had committed a crime and was being forced to do community service. I would be posed questions like "What did you do to have to do community service?" and "How many hours do you have left?" by people who were quite serious. I always responded by saying that I was a college student who had volunteered (here I pointed at the large sign that said, "Today's volunteer is...") for a class. The people expressed surprise, apologized, and said they didn't realize it was a

volunteer job. I myself had never thought that a Salvation Army bell-ringer was a criminal or being forced to ring the bell, I mean, who would trust a criminal with a pot full of money?

Then there were the people who responded positively. They typically returned my salutation, although this group also includes those who continued on to apologize for not donating. I'd approximate that the two prime responses, "positive" and "completely ignoring me", were split fairly evenly, with perhaps a slight advantage going to those who did respond. And in the group of people who did respond, I'd estimate that slightly less than half gave money.

Overall, it was an interesting experience that proved to be rich in a surprising wealth of data about the general populace's mentality. In order to provide an accurate paper capable of drawing conclusions I would need to keep track of precisely how many people responded in what way, as well as demographic information, weather conditions, and the experiment would need to be conducted at varying times of the day. However, if the three nights that I spent bell-ringing were unable to let me draw any hard conclusions, they at least gave me some interesting theses that can be carefully tested.

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Pavlov, I. P. *Conditioned reflexes: an investigation of the physiological activity of the cerebral cortex*. London: Oxford University Press, 1927 [reprinted by Dover, New York, 1960].

Skinner, B.F. *The behavior of organisms*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1938