3.5 Learning Theory as an Explanation of Attachment

AQA 7182 · about 60 minutes · Write-in edition

Total Marks

Name: _____ Date: ____ / ____ / _____

Answer each question. At least four longer questions require full sentences. Complete the pack in about 80 minutes.

1 Explain the operant conditioning account of attachment.

(Total for Question 1 is 4 marks)

2 Evaluate the use of animal studies as evidence in attachment theory debates.

(Total for Question 2 is 6 marks)

3 Apply learning theory to give two practical parenting suggestions and one further practical point.

(Total for Question 3 is 6 marks)

4 Identify the conditioning process in the applied baby-feeding example.

(Total for Question 4 is 3 marks)

5 Identify the learning process in Yusuf scenario.

(Total for Question 5 is 3 marks)

6 Discuss learning theory as an explanation of attachment.

(Total for Question 6 is 16 marks)

7 Use Harlow's findings as a brief evaluation of learning theory.

(Total for Question 7 is 4 marks)

8 Describe three strengths of the learning-theory explanation of attachment.

(Total for Question 8 is 6 marks)

Mark scheme · 3.5 Learning Theory as an Explanation of Attachment

Question 1

infant crying is a behaviour that can be negatively reinforced when caregiver responds and removes discomfort (e.g. feeding or soothing), making crying more likely in future oe	**M1**
explains negative reinforcement for the infant, e.g. caregiver feeding removes hunger, which is rewarding and strengthens the crying/cry-for-care behaviour oe	**A1**
caregiver behaviour is positively reinforced when responding produces social rewards, affection or the satisfaction of reducing infant distress, encouraging caregiving behaviour oe	**A1**
states that the two-way reinforcement creates a reciprocal pattern of behaviour that maintains the attachment bond over time oe	**A1**

Answer: Infant crying is negatively reinforced because caregiver response removes the infant's discomfort (for example feeding reduces hunger), which increases the likelihood of behaviours that elicit care. Caregivers are positively reinforced by social rewards or by relief at calming the infant, so both parties learn behaviours that maintain attachment.

Question 2

identifies ethical/methodological limitation: animal studies may involve procedures that would be unethical in humans, and animals differ from humans in cognition and social complexity oe	**M1**
explains consequence: this limits direct generalisation from monkey findings to human attachment, so such evidence should be treated cautiously oe	**A1**
identifies methodological limitation: controlled laboratory conditions in animal studies lack the social and cultural complexity of human caregiving contexts oe	**M1**
explains consequence: researchers should combine animal evidence with human studies (e.g. longitudinal human observations) before revising human attachment theories oe	**A1**
states recommended approach: use animal studies for suggesting mechanisms and hypotheses but seek converging evidence from ethically acceptable human research before drawing strong conclusions oe	**M1**
explains why this matters: triangulating evidence preserves scientific inference while respecting species differences and ethical constraints oe	**A1**

Answer: Animal studies can suggest mechanisms but pose ethical and generalisability limits; researchers should treat them as hypothesis-generating and seek converging human evidence under ethical constraints before revising explanations of human attachment.

Question 3

classical conditioning suggestion: pair caregiver presence with pleasant stimuli (play, gentle voice, routine feeding) to make caregiver a signal of comfort oe	**M1**
justification: repeated pairing will condition the infant to feel comforted by caregiver presence, promoting approach and trust oe	**A1**
operant conditioning suggestion: positively reinforce desired behaviours (e.g. calm settling) with attention or soothing, and remove attention following harmful behaviours in an appropriate way oe	**M1**
justification: reinforcement increases the frequency of calm, secure behaviours and helps the infant learn reliable responses from the caregiver oe	**A1**
additional practical note: ensure responses are consistent and sensitive rather than mechanical, to avoid unintended negative consequences oe	**M1**
justification: consistent contingencies make learning clearer and support trust, but sensitivity recognises emotional needs beyond simple reinforcement oe	**A1**

Answer: Classical: consistently pair caregiver presence with pleasant routines so the infant learns to associate the caregiver with comfort. Operant: reinforce calm settling with attention and soothing so calm behaviours increase; keep responses consistent and sensitive to support trust.

Question 4

identifies classical conditioning cao	**B1**
justifies by linking Amaka (neutral stimulus) paired with food (UCS) so Amaka becomes a CS eliciting a smiling response oe	**M1**
states the learned response: the baby's smile is now a conditioned response to Amaka because of repeated pairing with feeding oe	**A1**

Answer: Classical conditioning. Amaka was paired with food, so Amaka became a conditioned stimulus and the baby's smile is now a conditioned response.

Question 5

identifies operant conditioning cao	**B1**
justifies by reference to reinforcement: the infant's crying is negatively reinforced because Yusuf's response removes discomfort, increasing crying in the future oe	**M1**
alternatively acknowledges reciprocal reinforcement: Yusuf's caregiving is positively reinforced by the calming of the infant, supporting the operant account oe	**A1**

Answer: Operant conditioning. The infant's crying is negatively reinforced because Yusuf's comforting/feeding removes discomfort, making crying more likely when Yusuf appears; additionally, Yusuf's caregiving is positively reinforced by the reward of calming the baby.

Question 6

Level 4 Knowledge of learning theory and its application to attachment is detailed and accurate. Discussion is thorough and well balanced, integrating empirical evidence supporting and challenging the theory, methodological issues and theoretical limitations. The answer evaluates implications and arrives at a well-justified conclusion. Specialist terminology is used appropriately and the response is coherent and well organised.	**13-16**
Level 3 Knowledge of learning theory is generally accurate with some development. Discussion includes relevant evaluation and evidence, though coverage may be less comprehensive or slightly unbalanced. Application to attachment is clear and the answer offers a reasoned conclusion, with some appropriate use of terminology.	**9-12**
Level 2 Knowledge of learning theory is present but limited or partially accurate. Evaluation is superficial or incomplete, and supporting evidence is limited. The answer may lack clarity in places and the conclusion is tentative or weak. Terminology is used inconsistently.	**5-8**
Level 1 Knowledge is brief and contains significant errors or omissions. Little or no evaluation is evident, and there is minimal application to attachment. The answer is poorly organised with little use of specialist terminology.	**1-4**
Level 0 No creditable content.	**0**

Indicative content:

- AO1: Main claims - classical conditioning account: food is an unconditioned stimulus producing pleasure; caregiver becomes associated with food via repeated pairing and becomes a conditioned stimulus eliciting pleasure, producing attachment behaviours.
- AO1: Operant conditioning account - infant crying/cry-for-care is negatively reinforced when caregiver removes discomfort (e.g. feeding, soothing), increasing such behaviours; caregiver responses are positively reinforced by social rewards or the reduction of infant distress, creating a reciprocal reinforcement loop.
- AO1: Cupboard love (Dollard and Miller) emphasises feeding/food as the primary reinforcer driving attachment.
- AO3: Supporting strengths - the theory is parsimonious and testable, generates clear predictions, has practical applications for parenting and behaviour management, and draws on well-established learning principles that operate across species.
- AO3: Empirical challenge - Schaffer and Emerson found infants often attach to responsive, playful caregivers, not necessarily feeders, undermining the cupboard-love prediction that the feeder becomes primary attachment figure.
- AO3: Empirical challenge - Harlow's monkey studies showed preference for a soft, comforting surrogate over a wire feeding surrogate, suggesting contact comfort and emotional security are important; while animal evidence has limits, it challenges the feeding-focused account.
- AO3: Theoretical critique - learning theory is reductionist and stimulus-response focused, failing to account for internal cognitive representations, secure-base behaviour, individual differences and cultural variation in attachment patterns.
- AO3: Methodological issues - some supporting studies are correlational or rely on operational definitions of attachment behaviour that may not capture emotional quality; animal studies raise generalisability and ethical concerns.
- AO3: Integrative points - learning processes may contribute to some attachment behaviours (e.g. soothing routines, conditioned smiling) and offer useful adjuncts to broader theories, but are unlikely to be sufficient as a complete explanation of the complex emotional bond in humans.
- Conclusion: A balanced judgement that learning theory provides valuable, testable mechanisms and practical insights but is incomplete; attachment in humans also requires consideration of comfort, sensitivity, cognition and social-emotional development.

Question 7

identifies Harlow's finding that infant monkeys preferred the cloth mother to the wire mother even when the wire mother provided food oe	**M1**
explains why this challenges learning theory: attachment was not based purely on feeding/food reinforcement, contradicting cupboard-love predictions oe	**A1**
links to relevance for humans: suggests contact comfort and emotional security are important in attachment and that simple stimulus-response accounts are insufficient to explain the emotional bond in primates, including humans oe	**A1**
notes that while animal studies have limits, the basic challenge to a feeding-based account remains pertinent to human attachment theory oe	**A1**

Answer: Harlow showed monkeys preferred a soft, cloth surrogate to a wire one that fed them, challenging the idea that feeding alone causes attachment. This indicates contact comfort and emotional security matter, so simple feeding-based stimulus-response accounts cannot fully explain human-like attachment.

Question 8

strength 1: offers a clear, parsimonious mechanism (conditioning and reinforcement) that can be operationalised and tested experimentally oe	**M1**
explains why this is a strength: the theory's clarity allows specific predictions (e.g. pairing caregiver with feeding should increase attachment behaviours) and makes it relatively straightforward to design studies or interventions based on reinforcement principles oe	**A1**
strength 2: the theory has practical applications, for example informing behaviourally based parenting strategies that reinforce desirable behaviours and reduce undesired ones oe	**M1**
explains why this is a strength: such applications can be used in clinical or educational settings to encourage secure caregiving routines and predictable responses, which may benefit infant regulation and learning oe	**A1**
additional support: learning mechanisms are known to operate across species and contexts, giving some generalisability to the idea that reinforcement shapes social behaviour oe	**M1**
explains why this matters: cross-species evidence for basic conditioning increases the plausibility that some aspects of attachment behaviour may be learned via reinforcement processes oe	**A1**

Answer: Strengths include a clear, testable mechanism (conditioning) that leads to precise predictions and experimental tests, and useful practical applications in parenting or intervention by reinforcing desirable behaviours. Also, basic learning mechanisms operate across species, supporting some generalisability of reinforcement effects.