PSY.ATT5 Learning Theory as an Explanation of Attachment

Total Marks

AQA 7182 · Calculators not allowed · about 80 minutes

Name: _____ Date: ____ / ____ / _____

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

1 Outline the classical conditioning account of attachment as taught in the learning theory topic of attachment. Your answer should name the unconditioned stimulus and describe how the caregiver becomes associated with it in learning-theory terms, in the context of infant feeding.

Outline the classical conditioning account of attachment.

(Total for Question 1 is 2 marks)

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2 Explain how operant conditioning is used to account for infant attachment in learning theory, referring to reinforcement for both the infant and the caregiver and giving clear examples of negative and positive reinforcement in the caregiving context.

Explain the operant conditioning account of attachment.

(Total for Question 2 is 4 marks)

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3 Identify the 'cupboard love' assumption in Dollard and Miller's learning theory explanation of attachment and state one implication of that assumption for who becomes an infant's primary attachment figure.

Identify the 'cupboard love' assumption and one implication.

(Total for Question 3 is 4 marks)

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4 Give a brief applied example. Amaka's baby smiles whenever Amaka approaches because Amaka usually brings a bottle. Identify which learning process best describes this example and justify in one sentence using conditioning terminology.

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

(Total for Question 4 is 3 marks)

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5 Schaffer and Emerson's longitudinal research found that many infants formed their first specific attachments to caregivers who were responsive and interactive rather than necessarily those who fed them most. Outline one piece of evidence from Schaffer and Emerson that challenges the learning-theory 'cupboard love' account, and explain why it challenges that account.

Use Schaffer and Emerson as evidence against cupboard-love predictions.

(Total for Question 5 is 4 marks)

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6 Harlow's research with rhesus monkeys showed infant monkeys preferred a soft, cloth 'mother' to a wire 'mother' that provided food. Give one concise evaluative point using Harlow's findings that challenges learning theory as a full explanation of attachment, and explain why this is relevant to human attachment theories.

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

(Total for Question 6 is 4 marks)

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7 Learning theory has been criticised as reductionist because it treats attachment as a set of stimulus-response associations. Give two separate evaluative points that exemplify how learning theory is reductionist and why this matters for understanding human attachment.

Explain two reductionist critiques of learning theory.

(Total for Question 7 is 4 marks)

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8 Applied scenario: Yusuf's infant cries and Yusuf always arrives, comforts and sometimes feeds the infant. Over time the infant increasingly cries when Yusuf enters the room and calms when Yusuf picks them up. Identify whether classical conditioning or operant conditioning best explains the infant's crying increase, and give one clear reason referring to reinforcement or stimulus pairing.

Identify the learning process in Yusuf scenario.

(Total for Question 8 is 3 marks)

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9 Describe two strengths of learning theory as an explanation of attachment. Each point should include a clear reason why it is a strength and be linked to empirical or practical considerations.

Describe two strengths of the learning-theory explanation of attachment.

(Total for Question 9 is 6 marks)

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10 Outline one ethical or methodological limitation of using animal studies such as Harlow's as evidence against learning theory in relation to human attachment, and explain how researchers should treat such cross-species evidence when evaluating theories of human attachment.

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

(Total for Question 10 is 6 marks)

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11 Briefly apply learning-theory ideas to a parenting intervention: suggest one practical change a parent could make based on classical conditioning and one based on operant conditioning to encourage secure attachment behaviours in their infant. Each suggestion should include the learning principle used and a one-sentence justification.

Apply learning theory to give two practical parenting suggestions.

(Total for Question 11 is 6 marks)

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12 Discuss learning theory as an explanation of attachment. In your answer, outline the main learning-theory claims (classical and operant conditioning, including the cupboard-love idea), evaluate the theory using appropriate empirical evidence and theoretical critique, and conclude on the extent to which learning theory explains human attachment.

Discuss learning theory as an explanation of attachment.

(Total for Question 12 is 16 marks)

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Mark scheme · PSY.ATT5 Learning Theory as an Explanation of Attachment

Question 1

- **B1** food is an unconditioned stimulus (UCS) that produces pleasure as an unconditioned response (UCR) oe
- **B1** caregiver (initially a neutral stimulus) becomes associated with food through repeated pairing and becomes a conditioned stimulus (CS) that elicits a conditioned pleasure response, producing attachment oe
- **Answer: Food is the unconditioned stimulus producing pleasure; the caregiver becomes associated with feeding and becomes a conditioned stimulus producing a conditioned pleasure response, forming attachment.**

Question 2

- **M1** 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
- **A1** 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
- **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 3

- **M1** identifies the 'cupboard love' assumption: attachment is primarily based on feeding and the provision of food as the main source of reinforcement oe
- **A1** states implication: the person who feeds the infant will become the primary attachment figure, since they provide the primary reinforcer oe
- **A1** explains consequence: this predicts feeding frequency or provision of food should predict attachment strength, so the feeder is likely to be the main attachment figure oe
- **A1** notes explicitly that this assumption originates from Dollard and Miller's learning-theory view of attachment oe
- **Answer: Cupboard love assumes attachment arises from feeding and the provision of food as the main reinforcer. An implication is that the person who feeds the infant most often should become the primary attachment figure because they provide the primary reinforcement; this idea derives from Dollard and Miller.**

Question 4

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

- **M1** identifies evidence: many infants in Schaffer and Emerson's study formed specific attachments to caregivers who were most responsive and who played with them, not necessarily the person who fed them most often oe
- **A1** explains how this contradicts cupboard love: if feeding were the key reinforcer, the feeder should be the primary attachment figure, but Schaffer and Emerson found responsiveness predicted attachment instead oe
- **A1** links to implication: this suggests attachment involves sensitivity and interaction, not just food-based reinforcement oe
- **A1** states that this reduces the explanatory power of a pure stimulus-response feeding account for human attachment behaviour oe

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Question 6

- **M1** identifies Harlow's finding that infant monkeys preferred the cloth mother to the wire mother even when the wire mother provided food oe
- **A1** 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
- **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 7

- **M1** identifies reductionist point 1: learning theory reduces attachment to basic conditioning processes and reinforcement, ignoring complex emotions and cognitive processes involved in human bonds oe
- **A1** explains why this matters: it fails to account for the emotional quality of attachment such as comfort-seeking, secure-base behaviour and internal working models, limiting its explanatory scope for human attachment oe
- **M1** identifies reductionist point 2: learning theory treats all attachments as formed by the same simple mechanisms, overlooking individual differences, cultural factors and the role of caregiver sensitivity oe
- **A1** explains why this matters: it cannot explain variation in attachment patterns or the importance of caregiver responsiveness shown in human studies, making the theory incomplete for real-world social development oe
- **Answer: Learning theory reduces attachment to conditioning and reinforcement, ignoring emotions, cognition and individual or cultural variation. This limits its usefulness for explaining the complexity of human attachment, including secure-base behaviour and differences linked to caregiver sensitivity.**

Question 8

- **B1** identifies operant conditioning cao
- **M1** justifies by reference to reinforcement: the infant's crying is negatively reinforced because Yusuf's response removes discomfort, increasing crying in the future oe
- **A1** alternatively acknowledges reciprocal reinforcement: Yusuf's caregiving is positively reinforced by the calming of the infant, supporting the operant account oe
- **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 9

- **M1** strength 1: offers a clear, parsimonious mechanism (conditioning and reinforcement) that can be operationalised and tested experimentally oe
- **A1** 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
- **M1** strength 2: the theory has practical applications, for example informing behaviourally based parenting strategies that reinforce desirable behaviours and reduce undesired ones oe
- **A1** 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
- **M1** additional support: learning mechanisms are known to operate across species and contexts, giving some generalisability to the idea that reinforcement shapes social behaviour oe
- **A1** 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
- **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.**

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Question 10

- **M1** 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
- **A1** explains consequence: this limits direct generalisation from monkey findings to human attachment, so such evidence should be treated cautiously oe
- **M1** identifies methodological limitation: controlled laboratory conditions in animal studies lack the social and cultural complexity of human caregiving contexts oe
- **A1** explains consequence: researchers should combine animal evidence with human studies (e.g. longitudinal human observations) before revising human attachment theories oe
- **M1** 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
- **A1** explains why this matters: triangulating evidence preserves scientific inference while respecting species differences and ethical constraints oe
- **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 11

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

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Question 12

- **Level 4** (13-16): 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.
- **Level 3** (9-12): 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.
- **Level 2** (5-8): 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.
- **Level 1** (1-4): 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.
- **Level 0** (0): No creditable content.
- **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.

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