

Oh Dae-su of Oldboy through Behaviorism

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Abstract

Oh Dae-su is the protagonist of Park Chan-wook's 2003 Korean masterpiece *Oldboy*. Dae-su is a sad and tragic character who is mysteriously imprisoned for 15 years, only to one day wake up a free man with no explanation. Through never-ending difficulties, Dae-su is able to solve the mystery of why he was imprisoned, but not without consequences. His personality undergoes serious changes with perfect examples of classical and operant condition, reinforcement, and stimulus-response mechanisms. This is the reason he is such a great character to analyze when thinking about behaviorism. This story is such a perfect world to dive into because of its clear exemplification of key behaviorist principles and ideas such as Pavlovian conditioning (going so far as to "hypnotize" him with a bell, exactly as Pavlov did with the dogs), B.F. Skinner's ideas on reinforcement, and what long-term behavior modification and manipulation can do to a person.

Introduction

Oldboy originally started out as a popular manga series from the 1990's. Park Chan-wook, legendary director of *The Handmaiden* and *Lady Vengeance* decided to make a film loosely based upon this manga and it was released to audiences in 2003. I will be analyzing the original Korean 2003 film version for this paper. It stars Choi Min-sik as our protagonist Oh Dae-su, Kang Hye-jung as our protagonist's new friend Mi-do, and Yoo Ji-tae as the antagonist Lee Woo-jin.

Oh Dae-su drunkenly celebrates his daughter's fourth birthday when he is suddenly and mysteriously taken captive and held prisoner for 15 years without any explanation whatsoever. He is fed, groomed, and taken care of all without ever being able to interact with another human being or leave the claustrophobic confines of his hotel-like prison cell. Unbeknownst to him, during his imprisonment he was hypnotized by the sound of a bell and conditioned to freak out whenever the room started filling with gas, which it would do every so often. He is then released on the top of a building one day, suddenly waking up as a free man left to figure out the reason *why* he was imprisoned all by himself.

I will be analyzing Oh Dae-su's character, transformation, and personality changes and manipulation through the theories and ideas of behaviorism and the behaviorist psychological movement. Two particularly notable figures whose work and ideas can be found in the film are Ivan Pavlov and B.F. Skinner. Pavlov's conditioning and Skinner's ideas on reinforcement are completely present in the film and it's interesting to see how they operate and impact Oh Dae-su while he endures his imprisonment whether he is literally imprisoned or metaphorically imprisoned by his longing for understanding and truth even after he has been released. I will be

analyzing how Oh Dae-su, a once ordinary man was turned into a vengeful, angry, and volatile conditioned subject.

Ivan Pavlov in Oldboy

Ivan Pavlov was a famous Russian physiologist known for his work and Nobel Prize relating to digestion. He never was a psychologist, psychiatrist, or sociologist, yet he's widely considered to be integral to the popularization of the behaviorist movement. Pavlov is well known for his discovery of classical conditioning. He had noticed that when certain people entered the room, certain dogs he was experimenting on would salivate just as they would if you had brought them some food. Ivan wondered if he could condition the dogs to salivate without bringing them any food. He then conducted experiments that proved that you could do this exactly, and thus the idea of classical conditioning was born. In the case of Oldboy and Oh Dae-su, it's almost comical how similar the examples are. While Oh Dae-su spends his 15 years in prison, he endures multiple examples of classical conditioning, some he wasn't even aware of.

One example of this classical conditioning is the digitalized melody and gas that emanate from the walls as well as the creepy painting hanging in his room every so often. When the gas fills the room, he notices that he becomes sleepy. He then tells us that this is the same gas that Russia used on Chechen terrorists (8:22). When he wakes up, his hair is cut, his room is cleaned, and he has new clothes on his back. Throughout the course of a 15-year imprisonment, he experienced this gassing effect many times. Sometimes Dae-su would begin to scream and curse, refusing to give in to the effects of the gas. Other times he would find himself more at peace, accepting his fate and falling to the ground. Dae-su's behavior had been manipulated and classically trained to be erratic and fearful whenever he heard this melody (which is an amazing composition called "Cries and Whispers" by the way) and saw the gas.

Another great example of classical conditioning in the film is the dumplings. Over the 15 years, he only ever had one meal. This meal never changed and neither did its variety. He had the same dumplings day after day, year after year. The only clue he had as to who's dumplings they were was the taste that had been permanently seared onto his tongue, and the name "Blue Dragon" that he found on piece of paper one time in his food (36:01). When he is freed, he and Mi-do go around to every "Blue Dragon" restaurant, tasting the fried dumplings to see if they make the right one. When he does find it, he instantly recognizes it and runs to chase the deliveryman as he takes the order of dumplings to the regular location. He always has a serious demeanor, but when he tastes the dumplings and follows the deliveryman, he has an even more serious aura about him. He has this same vibe when he first meets Mi-do at the restaurant that she works at. He is given a wallet full of money and a phone by a stranger. Just before "eating something alive," the phone rings with the same song that was played every time the gas came from the walls. He freaks out and grabs the phone, earnest as ever (25:42).

When it comes to other behavior of Oh Dae-su's, his general distrust is something that is great to look at. Pavlov and behaviorists would likely say that his distrust in anyone and anything around him is because of the numerous unfortunate things he's had to endure over the last 15 years. They would detail how his life experience and the external factors that have acted on him have conditioned him to be distrustful. When Mi-do video-chats with a stranger about sushi online, and that stranger asks Oh Dae-su through the camera "how's life in a bigger prison Oh Dae-su?" the first thing that he does is leave, telling her that he can't trust her(37:50). Instead of following that lead, chasing his curiosity, he goes the route of distrust. This would be a classically conditioned response example. This proves that conditioning also isn't restricted to simple things such as salivating or may fear responses. It can be opened up to such concepts and

ideas as ambiguous and nebulous as simple trust. One's trust in their peers, their surroundings, their life as a whole, and even their ongoing story, can all be conditioned. A person's entire worldview can be conditioned the same way Pavlov's dogs were conditioned to salivate. Paul Eelen talks about this in a journal article he wrote, citing other theorists by saying "if conditioning were confined to what some have called "spit and twitches", it would lose much of its psychological interest" (Eelen, 2018). The emergence of such a concept within this film really forces us to question how we ourselves have been conditioned, and if any of our behavior or responses really are decided by us, or if we're all like Pavlov's dogs, only adhering to our own conditioned responses.

B.F. Skinner in Oldboy

While classical conditioning was discovered by Pavlov and his dogs in Russia, here in America, B.F. Skinner expounded upon E.L. Thorndike's work to establish the idea of operant conditioning. Skinner's experiment required placing a mouse in a box that had a lever, and a place where food would come out. This box would later come to be known as a "Skinner Box." If food came out whenever the mouse pulled the lever, it acted predictably. If food came out irregularly, the mouse acted erratically, much like an addict. This helped cement ideas around the ABCs of behavior (Antecedent, Behavior, Consequence) and the positive-negative/reinforcement-punishment square that can be used to understand behavior and its reaction. Skinner believed that there was no such thing as free will, that all behavior was either random or a reaction to the environment and he expounded upon this concept in his 1971 book titled *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*. "A person does not act upon the world, but the world acts upon him" (Skinner, 1971, p. 206). The idea of there being no such thing as free will is one of the key tenets of Oldboy, and of Oh Dae-su's character and reaction to what is around him.

While incarcerated, and particularly after his incarceration, Oh Dae-su is subjected to the same kind of reward system that comes from operant conditioning although the examples aren't quite as stark and fitting as the classical conditioning examples are. I'm sure Skinner would have much to say about his imprisonment. Dae-su is confined for a long time, and despite escape attempts and fighting back of any kind, Dae-su makes no progress. His passive submission is encouraged by his continuing to be fed, groomed, and taken care of. This is an interesting example of positive reinforcement. Something positive is given (food, entertainment, shelter) regardless of his behavior. Unrelenting is the nourishment and no matter what he does, it will not change. Dae-su eventually submits and takes what he is given. This doesn't mean he enjoys it, but his behavior is impacted by what he is given. The level of psychological manipulation and emotional control that he experiences is almost its own kind of conditioning.

His learned behavior is also rewarded. While confined in his tiny room, he practices martial arts. He draws the outline of a man on the wall and punches until his knuckles bleed. He punches until he needs to wrap his fists with fabric, and punches until he breaks his hand (13:28). Later in the film, we can see quarter-sized, white callouses on his knuckles from how much he's practiced fighting, something of a reward (32:46). When he is first released, one of the first things he does is get into a fight with a gang on the street. Just before he begins fighting, he asks himself "Is it any use in real life?" to which he promptly responds to his own question with, "It is" (23:47). He is rewarded with physical prowess over almost anyone from his years of training. Because of this, his aggression is positively reinforced. This can be seen again in the iconic hallway fight scene where he takes on a whole gang of the prison's henchmen with nothing but a hammer (46:37). He doesn't live in fear anymore and his fighting spirit is now rewarded after

years of suffering. Oh Dae-su teaches himself that violence equals control. This is why he relies on it so heavily.

At the end of the film, to prove himself to Lee Woo-jin, Oh Dae-su cuts off his own tongue and crawls around pretending to be a dog in hopes of proving that he truly is lesser than Woo-jin, and that he's nothing to worry about (1:45:57). This is another example of Dae-su's violent tendencies manifesting themselves because of the reinforcement he's received. Someone else in his shoes would certainly have done something irrational, there's no doubt about that, but they might have not cut off their own tongue. Dae-su believes that things can be fixed or made up through acts of violence, rather than remaining passive and peaceful. Dae-su doesn't ask questions (at least sincere ones), he doesn't respond in a healthy or forgivable way, instead he continues to rely on his violence. What's particularly interesting is how his violence ends up being redirected towards himself only to prove a point, his loyalty, and his forgiveness. There's a plethora of interpretations and thoughts that could be fleshed out when it comes to the idea of violence within this film, but when looking at it through the lens of behaviorism and conditioned behavior, we can see that even our conditioned behavior, no matter how destructive or harmful, can be aimed at ourselves.

Other behaviors of Dae-su's that Skinner would've looked at similarly would've been Dae-su's escape attempts that I previously mentioned. Through the Law of Use or Extinction, we see that his attempts to escape are ignored and lead to nothing, even though later in the film we learn that each person in captivity is constantly monitored by security cameras. The law of use suggests that he would lose this behavior over time, but in this case perhaps it is his pure and complete desperation that fuels him to do what he does, no matter how little stimulus he receives for his efforts. Eventually, he breaks through and etches a brick away from the wall, kicking it

out and exposing himself to that tiny window of the world. When he does this, it is raining, and he goes haywire from excitement, from the stimulus he receives. “A response is strengthened not by repetition, but by the consequences that follow it” (Skinner, 1953, p. 73). The level of stimulus he receives is insulting considering the level effort he put into carving through the wall, but its importance is enough to keep him going, to fuel his fire. Unfortunately, he is released before we can see if that would’ve happened, and if the law of use or extinction would’ve manifested themselves, keeping him from continuing, or motivating him to dig even further.

Conclusion

Oh Dae-su is cognitive psychology’s worst nightmare, as almost all his behavior completely supports the ideas, concepts, and theories behind the behaviorist movement. From the beginning of the film, all the way to the end, through Dae-su’s arc, as well as other characters’ arcs, we find examples of classical and operant conditioning, ideas established by and expounded upon by Ivan Pavlov, and some established by Thorndike, later to be understood by B.F. Skinner. This film and Dae-su’s message supports the idea that there is no such thing as free will, that we truly are all computers, constantly being programmed. The last scene of the film we find Dae-su being hypnotized in order to forget all that he’s gone through, specifically the trauma he endured related to his daughter (1:52:06). Even in these final moments, we find even more conditioning. He’s been conditioned by music, through violence, through neglect. He’s been hypnotized and manipulated in almost every way, and it can’t even be ignored by Dae-su or Woo-jin. Everywhere you look, things are acting and reacting to each other only because of what they previously endured. If there’s a notable action, it can be explained by what that character has experienced. This film forces us to ask ourselves how we’ve been conditioned, if it’s been intentional or not, and how we can truly recognize those patterns within ourselves. Dae-su’s story

is almost a love letter to the behaviorists and their insights and serves as the perfect film to look at when thinking about behaviorism.

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