

Social learning theory

Albert Bandura believed that new patterns of behaviour could be acquired not only through direct experience, but also by observing one's own behaviour and the behaviour of others. Unlike operant conditioning, where the role of reinforcement is simply to strengthen a response by providing immediate consequences, Bandura believed that reinforcement could also serve an informative function for the individual. During the course of learning, people not only perform responses; they also observe the different consequences of their own and others' behaviour. On the basis of this feedback, they develop hypotheses about the types of behaviour most likely to succeed in a given situation. These hypotheses then serve as guides for their future behaviour. Bandura referred to this approach as **social learning theory**.

Insider tip...

A common pitfall when answering questions on this area is that students provide descriptions of a study when a question has actually asked about the theory. Make sure you use appropriate notation to answer the specific question set.



▶ The Bobo doll.

Social learning theory is a concept known as 'social cognitive theory' to acknowledge the importance of motivational processes in social learning.

The term identification is used in a slightly different way here than it was on page 14. However, both uses of the term stress either a desire to be part of, or a recognition of similarity between, the individual and others.

KEY STUDY: BANDURA ET AL. (1961)

Procedures

Bandura et al. (1961) carried out an experiment involving children who observed aggressive or non-aggressive adult models and were then tested for imitative learning in the absence of the model. Half the children were expected to act as models interacting aggressively with a five-sided Bobo doll and half expected to act as non-aggressive models.

The aggressive model displayed distinctive physically aggressive acts towards the doll, e.g. striking it with a mallet, accompanied by verbal aggression such as saying 'BOY' following exposure to the model. Children were frustrated by being shown attractive toys which they were not allowed to play with. They were then taken to a room where, among other boys, there was a Bobo doll.

SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY (BANDURA, 1986)

Modelling

In order for social learning to take place, someone must carry out (or model) the attitude or behaviour to be learned. Individuals that perform this role are referred to as **models**. There is different types of model. A live model might be a parent, a teacher or a friend or a member of the group. A symbolic model would be someone portrayed in the media, for example a character on TV. These models provide examples of behaviour that can be observed by the individual and reproduced by them in a process known as **imitation**.

Imitation

Although a certain amount of learning takes place through direct reinforcement, much of what is learned is acquired through imitation or attitudes and behaviour that are modelled by peers and significant others. Research on imitation has shown that, unlike the relatively slow learning that takes place with conditioning, when a model is provided, whole patterns of behaviour can be rapidly acquired. The key determinants of whether a behaviour is imitated are (i) the credibility of the model, (ii) the observer's perceived ability to perform that behaviour and (iii) the degree of consequences of the behaviour.

Identification

Identification refers to the extent to which an individual relates to a model and being similar or 'fit' is similar to that person. In order to identify with a model, observers must feel that he or she is similar enough to them that they would be likely to experience the same outcomes in the situation. Research (e.g. Shuts et al., 2010) suggests that children are more likely to identify with and preferentially learn from models who are similar to them, particularly same-sex models. Identification with a model means that the individual is more likely to imitate that behaviour, meaning that social learning is more likely to be effective.

Vicarious reinforcement

Bandura and Walters (1963) noted that children who observed a model rewarded for aggressive behaviour were much more likely to imitate that behaviour than children who had observed a non-rewarded for the same behaviour. Bandura called this **vicarious reinforcement** – (i.e. individuals are about the likely consequences of an action, and then adjust their subsequent behaviour accordingly). The concept of vicarious reinforcement suggests that individuals do not need to experience rewards or punishments directly in order to learn. Instead they can observe the consequences experienced by a model and then make judgements as to the likelihood of experiencing these outcomes themselves.

The role of mediational processes

Social learning differs from other learning approaches in that it places special importance on **mediational processes**. Bandura (1986) claimed that, in order for social learning to take place, the observer must form mental representations of the behaviour displayed by the model and the probable consequences of that behaviour in terms of expectancies of future outcomes. When appropriate opportunities arise in the future, the individual might display the learned behaviour because of the expectation of positive consequences is greater than the expectation of negative consequences.

Findings

Children who observed the aggressive model reproduced a good deal physically and verbally aggressive behaviour resembling that of the male children who observed the non-aggressive model exhibited minimal aggression toward the Bobo doll.

About one-third of the children who observed the aggressive model repeated the model's verbal responses while none of the children who repeated the non-aggressive model made verbally aggressive remarks. In a follow-up to this study, Bandura and Walters found that children who saw the model being rewarded for aggressive acts were more likely to show a high level of aggression in their own play.