

Bandura - Social Learning Theory

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In social learning theory, Albert Bandura (1977) agrees with the behaviorist learning theories of classical conditioning and operant conditioning. However, he adds two important ideas:

1. Mediating processes occur between stimuli & responses.
2. Behavior is learned from the environment through the process of observational learning.

Observational Learning

Children observe the people around them behaving in various ways. This is illustrated during the famous Bobo doll experiment (Bandura, 1961).

Individuals that are observed are called models. In society, children are surrounded by many influential models, such as parents within the family, characters on children's TV, friends within their peer group and teachers at school. These models provide examples of behavior to observe and imitate, e.g., masculine and feminine, pro and anti-social, etc.

Children pay attention to some of these people (models) and encode their behavior. At a later time they may imitate (i.e., copy) the behavior they have observed. They may do this regardless of whether the behavior is 'gender appropriate' or not, but there are a number of processes that make it more likely that a child will reproduce the behavior that its society deems appropriate for its gender.

First, the child is more likely to attend to and imitate those people it perceives as similar to itself. Consequently, it is more likely to imitate behavior modeled by people of the same gender.

Second, the people around the child will respond to the behavior it imitates with either reinforcement or punishment. If a child imitates a model's behavior and the consequences are rewarding, the child is likely to continue performing the behavior. If a parent sees a little girl consoling her teddy bear and says "what a kind girl you are," this is rewarding for the child and makes it more likely that she will repeat the behavior. Her behavior has been reinforced (i.e., strengthened).

Reinforcement can be external or internal and can be positive or negative. If a child wants approval from parents or peers, this approval is an external reinforcement, but feeling happy about being approved of is an internal reinforcement. A child will behave in a way which it believes will earn approval because it desires approval.

Positive (or negative) reinforcement will have little impact if the reinforcement offered externally does not match with an individual's needs. Reinforcement can be positive or negative, but the important factor is that it will usually lead to a change in a person's behavior.

Third, the child will also take into account of what happens to other people when deciding whether or not to copy someone's actions. A person learns by observing the consequences of another person's (i.e., models) behavior, e.g., a younger sister observing an older sister being rewarded for a particular behavior is more likely to repeat that behavior herself. This is known as vicarious reinforcement.

This relates to an attachment to specific models that possess qualities seen as rewarding. Children will have a number of models with whom they identify. These may be people in their immediate world, such as parents or older siblings, or could be fantasy characters or people in the media. The motivation to identify with a particular model is that they have a quality which the individual would like to possess.

Identification occurs with another person (the model) and involves taking on (or adopting) observed behaviors, values, beliefs and attitudes of the person with whom you are identifying.

The term identification as used by Social Learning Theory is similar to the Freudian term related to the Oedipus complex. For example, they both involve internalizing or adopting another person's behavior. However, during the Oedipus complex, the child can only identify with the same sex parent, whereas with Social Learning Theory the person (child or adult) can potentially identify with any other person.

Identification is different to imitation as it may involve a number of behaviors being adopted, whereas imitation usually involves copying a single behavior.

Mediational Processes

SLT is often described as the 'bridge' between traditional learning theory (i.e., behaviorism) and the cognitive approach. This is because it focuses on how mental (cognitive) factors are involved in learning.

Unlike Skinner, Bandura (1977) believes that humans are active information processors and think about the relationship between their behavior and its consequences.

Observational learning could not occur unless cognitive processes were at work. These mental factors mediate (i.e., intervene) in the learning process to determine whether a new response is acquired.

Therefore, individuals do not automatically observe the behavior of a model and imitate it. There is some thought prior to imitation, and this consideration is called mediational processes. This occurs between observing the behavior (stimulus) and imitating it or not (response)

Behaviourist Model (only study observable / external behaviour)



Cognitive Model (can scientifically study internal behavior)



There are four mediational processes proposed by Bandura:

1. **Attention:** The extent to which we are exposed/notice the behavior. For a behavior to be imitated, it has to grab our attention. We observe many behaviors on a daily basis, and many of these are not noteworthy. Attention is therefore extremely important in whether a behavior influences others imitating it.
2. **Retention:** How well the behavior is remembered. The behavior may be noticed but is it not always remembered which obviously prevents imitation. It is important therefore that a memory of the behavior is formed to be performed later by the observer.

Much of social learning is not immediate, so this process is especially vital in those cases. Even if the behavior is reproduced shortly after seeing it, there needs to be a memory to refer to.

3. **Reproduction:** This is the ability to perform the behavior that the model has just demonstrated. We see much behavior on a daily basis that we would like to be able to imitate but that this not always possible. We are limited by our physical ability and for that reason, even if we wish to reproduce the behavior, we cannot.

This influences our decisions whether to try and imitate it or not. Imagine the scenario of a 90-year-old-lady who struggles to walk watching Dancing on Ice. She may appreciate that the skill is a desirable one, but she will not attempt to imitate it because she physically cannot do it.

4. **Motivation:** The will to perform the behavior. The rewards and punishment that

follow a behavior will be considered by the observer. If the perceived rewards outweigh the perceived costs (if there are any), then the behavior will be more likely to be imitated by the observer. If the vicarious reinforcement is not seen to be important enough to the observer, then they will not imitate the behavior.

Critical Evaluation

The social learning approach takes thought processes into account and acknowledges the role that they play in deciding if a behavior is to be imitated or not. As such, SLT provides a more comprehensive explanation of human learning by recognizing the role of mediational processes.

However, although it can explain some quite complex behavior, it cannot adequately account for how we develop a whole range of behavior including thoughts and feelings. We have a lot of cognitive control over our behavior and just because we have had experiences of violence does not mean we have to reproduce such behavior.

It is for this reason that Bandura modified his theory and in 1986 renamed his Social Learning Theory, Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), as a better description of how we learn from our social experiences.

Some criticisms of social learning theory arise from their commitment to the environment as the chief influence on behavior. It is limiting to describe behavior solely in terms of either nature or nurture and attempts to do this underestimate the complexity of human behavior. It is more likely that behavior is due to an interaction between nature (biology) and nurture (environment).

Social learning theory is not a full explanation for all behavior. This is particularly the case when there is no apparent role model in the person's life to imitate for a given behavior.

The discovery of mirror neurons has lent biological support to the theory of social learning. Although research is in its infancy the recent discovery of "mirror neurons" in primates may constitute a neurological basis for imitation. These are neurons which fire both if the animal does something itself, and if it observes the action being done by another.

References

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