

Social Learning Perspective

William G. Huitt & David M. Monetti

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From the 1930s through the 1950s the behavioral theory of operant conditioning, with its emphasis on the application of consequences to influence behavioral change, was the dominant perspective in U.S. psychology. With the reintroduction of a cognitive perspective in the 1950s (e.g., Miller 1956; Miller, Galanter, and Pribram 1960), researchers began to look for ways to integrate the behavioral and cognitive perspectives. Social learning theory, as developed by Neal Miller and John Dollard (1941), Robert Sears (1951), and Albert Bandura (1977), contributed to connecting behavioral and cognitive approaches to learning, and is an important step toward modern versions of learning theory.

Bandura (1962), building on the earlier work of Miller and Dollard (1941), proposed that learning first occurs cognitively through imitation, and then is modified through the application of consequences. In contrast to a purely behavioral approach, social cognitive theorists propose that individuals are active participants in their own learning. Based on a series of studies during the 1960s and 1970s (e.g., Bandura 1963, 1965a), Bandura in 1977 proposed a four-step process for how individuals learn through observing others' behavior. This process has been referred to as observational learning or modeling, and involves:

- attention—the individual notices something in the environment;
- retention—the individual remembers what was noticed;
- reproduction—the individual produces an action that is a copy of what was noticed;
- motivation—the environment delivers a consequence that changes the probability that the behavior will occur again (reinforcement and punishment).

Through the careful observation of others, individuals learn numerous new behaviors such as emotional reactions and how to use tools in their environments. Bandura (1965b) demonstrated that individuals modify their own behaviors based on the consequences (e.g., reinforcement or punishment) that others receive. He called this phenomenon *vicarious learning*. Individuals tend to model their behavior on persons who are similar to themselves, persons who are of higher status than themselves, and persons who are either reinforced for their behavior or not punished for it. One example of the power of imitation is found in the results of the infamous “Bobo doll study” (Bandura, Ross and Ross 1961). In this study preschool children who observed adults mistreating a Bobo doll were more likely to engage in similar aggressive behavior than children who had not observed the adults' aggressive behavior.

In more recent years, Bandura turned his attention to the importance of self-efficacy, self-regulation, and the desire of individuals to develop agency over their lives (Bandura 1986, 1989, 2001). To describe the learning process from this perspective, Bandura developed a concept called *reciprocal determinism*, which details a three-way relationship between a person, his or her behavior, and the environment. In the social-cognitive model each of the three elements are

equally important and influence the other elements. Thus, an individual's unique characteristics interact with overt behaviors and environmental models and feedback.

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