

Social Learning Perspective

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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 American psychology. With the reintroduction of a cognitive perspective in the 1950s (e.g., Miller, 1956; Miller, Galanter & Pribram, 1960), researchers began to look for ways to integrate the behavioral and cognitive perspectives. Social learning theory, as developed by Miller and Dollard (1941), Sears (1951), and Bandura (1977), contributed to connecting behavioral and cognitive approaches to learning and is an important step towards 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 (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:

1. Attention -- the individual notices something in the environment.
2. Retention -- the individual remembers what was noticed.
3. Reproduction -- the individual produces an action that is a copy of what was noticed.
4. Motivation -- the environment delivers a consequence that changes the probability the behavior will be emitted again (reinforcement and punishment).

Individuals, through the careful observation of others, learn numerous new behaviors such as emotional reactions, how to use tools in their environment, and increasing or decreasing inhibitions. Bandura (1965b) demonstrated that individuals will modify their own behaviors based on the consequences, reinforcement and punishment, others receive. He called this phenomenon vicarious learning. Individuals tend to model person's who are similar to themselves, person's who are of higher status than themselves, and those individuals who are either reinforced for their behavior or are not punished for it. One example of the power of imitation is found in the results of the now infamous Bobo doll study (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961). In this study, pre-school children who observed adults mistreating a Bobo doll were more likely to engage in similar aggressive behavior than children who had not viewed adult models behaving in an aggressive manner.

In more recent years, Bandura (1986, 1989, 2001) turned his attention to the importance of self-efficacy, self-regulation, and the desire of individuals to develop agency over their lives. 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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