SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY

Historically, social learning theory has focused on the ways in which people learn from observing one another, with particular attention to modeling and imitation. In its early years in the 1960s, its roots were in behaviorism, giving attention to the potential roles of environmental stimuli and consequences (reinforcement and punishment) in learning and behavior. But over time, it has increasingly incorporated cognitive factors into its explanations of how people learn and why they behave as they do, and it is now sometimes called social cognitive theory. For example, it has expanded far beyond learning through observation to include people's interpretations of what they see, their expectations regarding future events, and their beliefs about their ability to successfully accomplish challenging tasks. Furthermore, it has increasingly portrayed learning and behavior as being controlled not by environmental circumstances but rather by learners themselves.

The undisputed father of social learning theory is Albert Bandura of Stanford University, whose landmark 1977 book *Social Learning Theory* pulled together the central tenets of the social learning perspective and marked a clear departure from behaviorist traditions. Other prominent social learning theorists include Dale Schunk of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and Barry Zimmerman of the City University of New York.

Social learning theory is a complex, multifaceted perspective on human learning and behavior, but many of its key ideas relate to one or more of the following: (1) reciprocal causation and personal agency, (2) expectations and self-efficacy, (3) modeling, and (4) self-regulation.

Reciprocal Causation and Personal Agency

At the heart of contemporary social learning theory is the concept of reciprocal causation (Bandura, 1989; in earlier years, Bandura used the term *reciprocal determinism*). In particular, human learning is portrayed as a three-way interaction among environmental variables (e.g., available learning opportunities, response–reinforcement contingencies), person variables (e.g., existing abilities and beliefs, situation-specific cognitive processes), and behavioral variables (specific actions taken in various contexts). For example:

- Positive feedback about an individual's performance on a classroom task tends to enhance the individual's self-confidence in relation to that task (here environment affects person).
- Frequent exposure to aggressive models is likely to increase an individual's aggressive behavior (here environment affects behavior).
- An individual who believes that he or she has the potential to become a basketball player is likely to seek out learning opportunities that might enhance basketball skills (here person affects environment).
- An individual who believes that learning certain textbook material will enhance performance on an upcoming exam is likely to spend time studying that material (here person affects behavior).
- An individual who behaves rudely in social situations is likely to get negative reactions from others (here behavior affects environment).
- An individual who consistently fails at mathematical tasks is likely to believe that he or she has little aptitude for math (here behavior affects person).

This idea of reciprocal causation makes it clear that people are not the unwilling victims of environmental circumstances. Quite the contrary, people can and often do take active steps to either modify their current environments or else seek out new environments that are more compatible with their needs and desires. In other words, human beings have personal agency (Bandura, 2006).

Expectations and Self-Efficacy

Whereas behaviorists talk about objectively identifiable response–reinforcement contingencies, social learning theorists add a cognitive element and talk about awareness of existing contingencies and expectations of future ones. People's beliefs about contingencies are based in part on their own experiences and in part on the consequences they observe for the people around them. For example, in a phenomenon known as vicarious reinforcement, an individual who observes someone else receive reinforcement for a particular behavior is apt to show an increase in that behavior, even though he or she has not personally been reinforced. Similarly, in a phenomenon known as vicarious punishment, an individual who observes someone else being punished for a particular response will show a decrease in that response.

Not only do people form expectations about the likely outcomes of various behaviors, they also form efficacy expectations, beliefs about whether they personally have the ability to execute particular behaviors successfully. People are more likely to engage in certain activities when they have confidence that they can carry out the activities successfully—that is, when they have high self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982; sometimes the term *perceived self-efficacy* is used). Self-efficacy is more task- or domain-specific than self-concept and self-esteem (which are usually conceptualized as fairly global self-assessments) and tends to be a more accurate predictor of people's activity choices. Self-efficacy has additional effects as well. For instance, when tackling a task for which they have high (rather than low self-efficacy), people set higher goals for themselves, exert more effort, persist in the face of obstacles, and ultimately achieve at higher levels. Such effects are seen even when the previous ability levels of high-efficacious

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and low-efficacious people have been equivalent (Bandura, 1986, 1997; Bong & Clark, 1999; Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992).

Social learning theorists suggest that several factors affect the development of high or low self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986, 1997, 2006; Schunk, 1989). Certainly one's prior successes and failures related to an activity or domain have an impact. In addition, messages from others (e.g., general pep talks, specific suggestions about how to improve performance) can boost self-efficacy a bit, at least for the short run. Perceptions of reasonable environmental support—necessary material resources, others' guidance and assistance, and so on—come into play as well.

Observations of what peers can do also have an impact on self-efficacy: People are more likely to have confidence that they can be successful at a task if they see others of similar ability accomplishing it successfully. In some instances, it is better to observe a model struggling at first and then eventually achieving mastery; such an observation conveys that success is possible but requires effort and persistence (e.g., Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 2002).

Sometimes people have greater self-efficacy when they work in a group rather than alone. Such collective self-efficacy tends to be based not only on people's beliefs regarding their own and other group members' abilities but also on their beliefs regarding how effectively they can all work together (Bandura, 1997).

Modeling

Consistent with everyday usage of the word, *modeling* in social learning theory can refer either to demonstrating a behavior for someone else or to imitating an observed behavior. Models can be either live (i.e., actual people in one's immediate environment) or symbolic (i.e., real or fictional characters portrayed in books, films, or other media. People are most likely to imitate models whom they perceive to be competent, prestigious, powerful, and stereotypically gender appropriate (Bandura, 1986; Schunk, 1987).

Social learning theorists propose that modeling can have several possible effects on behavior (Bandura, 1977, 1986). First and foremost, it enables observational learning: People can learn entirely new behaviors by observing others as they perform those behaviors. Second, it can have a facilitation effect: When people see someone else being reinforced for a behavior they have previously acquired, they are more likely to perform the behavior themselves (vicarious reinforcement is at work here). Third, it can have an inhibition effect: Seeing someone else being punished for a behavior decreases the likelihood that observers will exhibit that behavior (vicarious punishment is at work). And fourth, it can sometimes have a disinhibition effect: When people observe another person engaging in a previously forbidden behavior and escaping any adverse consequences (and perhaps even being reinforced for it), they are themselves more likely to engage in that behavior than they were previously.

From the social learning perspective, four conditions are necessary for successful modeling to occur (Bandura, 1977, 1986):

- *Attention:* The observer must pay attention to the model and especially to important aspects of the modeled behavior.
- *Retention:* The observer must accurately remember what he or she has seen. Bandura has suggested that people form memory codes that enable them to recall what they've seen and reproduce it either immediately or at some later time. Some memory codes take the form of visual images. Others are verbal codes, such as one-word labels for specific actions or step-by-step instructions for performing a sequence.
- *Motor reproduction:* The observer must be physically and cognitively capable of executing the observed behavior. Furthermore, it is beneficial for the observer to perform the behavior at the same time it is being observed or immediately thereafter, ideally in the presence of the model. Doing so not only facilitates the formation of memory codes for the behavior but also provides an opportunity for the model to give feedback about the quality of execution.
- *Motivation:* The observer must have a desire to perform the modeled behavior. For instance, people are apt to imitate only behaviors that they perceive to be relevant to their own personal circumstances (Schunk, 1987; Zimmerman, 2004).

Modeling and Aggression

Social learning theorists' research on modeling has been especially influential in current views about the origins of aggression. Although some individuals are unusually aggressive as a result of brain injury or mental illness, others may acquire their aggressive tendencies from their social surroundings. For example, in a classic study with 3- to 5-year-olds by Bandura, Ross, and Ross (1961), children were brought, one at a time, into a game room, where they were seated at a small table and shown how to create pictures with colorful stickers and other art materials. As they were working, some of the children observed an adult model across the room playing quietly with wooden construction toys. Other children instead observed an adult behaving aggressively toward an inflatable punching doll; some of the behaviors were quite unusual (e.g., hitting the doll on the head with a wooden mallet, kicking it aggressively around the room, and saying such things as "Sock him in the nose," "Throw him in the air," and "Pow!"). A third group of children (a control group) saw no model at all while they were creating pictures.

After a 10-minute period, the children were escorted to another location, where they were mildly frustrated:

As soon as they began to play with some attractive and entertaining toys, they were told that they could no longer play with the toys. At that point, the children were led to a third room that contained both nonaggressive and aggressive toys (including the inflatable punching doll and wooden mallet). The children's behaviors in this room were observed through a one-way mirror and coded for nonaggressive and aggressive content. Children who had observed the aggressive model behaved much more aggressively than children who had seen either the nonaggressive model or no model at all, and they displayed many of the specific verbal and nonverbal behaviors they had seen the aggressive model display.

Social learning theorists have found that aggressive models in the media can have an impact as well. In a follow-up study with $2\frac{1}{2}$- to 5-year-olds, Bandura, Ross, and Ross (1963) used essentially the same procedure that they had used before, but they omitted the nonaggressive model and exposed children in three experimental groups to one of three models displaying identical aggressive behaviors toward the punching doll: a live model in the room, a film of that model, or a cartoon-like film of an adult in a cat costume. After being mildly frustrated, all three groups of children exposed to an aggressive model showed significantly higher rates of aggression than did children in a no-model control group. Numerous studies have since confirmed that aggressive models—whether they are people that children encounter in their own lives or fictional characters in films, videogames, or other media—can indeed lead children to act more aggressively and believe that aggression is an acceptable form of venting frustration or achieving one's goals.

Self-Regulation

As social learning theory has evolved, it has increasingly emphasized the role of self-regulation in behavior. By observing what happens to themselves and others, people learn which behaviors are and are not typically acceptable and fruitful; they also make note of the standards for performance that others adopt or communicate. Gradually, they develop their own notions about appropriate and inappropriate behavior, and they choose and evaluate their actions accordingly. In recent years, social learning theorists have expanded their work on self-regulation to include learning as well as behavior. Self-regulated learners can work independently and effectively for extended periods, and in classroom situations, they tend to be among the highest achievers, especially in adolescence and adulthood.

Self-regulation includes a number of specific self-regulatory processes that are largely cognitive rather than behavioral in nature. For example, Zimmerman and Schunk (2004) have suggested that self-regulation involves a number of processes that occur in three distinct phases. The forethought phase occurs before any action is executed. During this phase, the individual engages in task analysis, forming appropriate goals to strive for and identifying potentially effective strategies for achieving those goals. In addition, the individual activates self-motivational beliefs, ideally conjuring up sufficient interest and self-efficacy to sustain reasonable effort and persistence at the activity ahead.

In the performance phase, the individual actually engages in the task or activity at hand. During this phase, the individual draws on a repertoire of self-control strategies, such as making a concerted effort to focus attention, keeping distracting thoughts and emotions in check, and providing self-instructions to guide performance. Also, the individual engages in self-observation, monitoring progress toward the predetermined goals and adjusting strategies as needed.

Finally, in the self-reflection phase, the individual looks back on his or her accomplishments. This phase includes self-evaluation, comparing the final performance against the original goals. The individual also identifies the possible causes of any weaknesses in performance—for instance, whether shortcomings are due to insufficient effort, low innate ability, bad luck, lack of environmental support, and so on. (Such perceived causes are known as attributions; see the discussion of attribution theory in this encyclopedia.) And ultimately the individual has one or more self-reactions, perhaps experiencing pride in a job well done, feeling shame or guilt about inferior performance, or making a mental note of strategies that were and were not effective.

In recent years, social learning theorists' research on self-regulation has resonated with many practitioners in clinical and educational settings. It appears that, although some people develop effective self-regulatory strategies on their own, many others do not. Innumerable studies have shown that training in specific strategies (e.g., self-instructions, self-monitoring, self-evaluation) can significantly improve children's and adults' day-to-day behaviors and classroom achievement.

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