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# Bandura - Social Learning Theory

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In social learning theory Albert Bandura (1977) states **behavior is learned from the environment** through the process of **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 masculine and feminine behavior to observe and imitate.

They 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 sex.

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 the same sex as it is.

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 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. This is known as **vicarious reinforcement**.

This relates to 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 elder 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 Identity 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.

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## References

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## Bandura - Bobo Doll Study

Bandura (1961) conducted a study to investigate if social behaviors (i.e. aggression) can be acquired by imitation.

24 Children watched an adult model behave aggressively towards a blow up toy called a bobo doll. Another 24 children were exposed to a non-aggressive model and the final 24 child were used as a control group and not exposed to any model at all.

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