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Social Learning Theory
An Overview of Bandura's Social Learning Theory

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"Learning would be exceedingly laborious, not to mention hazardous, if people had to rely solely on the effects of their own actions to inform them what to do. Fortunately, most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action."
-Albert Bandura, **Social Learning Theory**, 1977

What is Social Learning Theory?

The social learning theory proposed by Albert Bandura[1] has become perhaps the most influential theory of learning and development. While rooted in many of the basic concepts of traditional learning theory, Bandura believed that direct reinforcement could not account for all types of learning.

His theory added a social element, arguing that people can learn new information and behaviors by watching other people. Known as observational learning (or modeling), this type of learning can be used to explain a wide variety of behaviors.

Basic Social Learning Concepts

There are three core concepts at the heart of social learning theory. First is the idea that people can learn through observation. Next is the idea that internal mental states are an essential part of this process. Finally, this theory recognizes that just because something has been learned, it does not mean that it will result in a change in behavior.

Let's explore each of these concepts in greater depth.

1. People can learn through observation.

Observational Learning

In his famous Bobo doll experiment[2], Bandura demonstrated that children learn and imitate behaviors they have observed in other people. The children in Bandura's studies observed an adult acting violently toward a Bobo doll. When the children were later allowed to play in a room with the Bobo doll, they began to imitate the aggressive actions they had previously observed.

Bandura identified three basic models of observational learning:

1. A live model, which involves an actual individual demonstrating or acting out a behavior.
2. A verbal instructional model, which involves descriptions and explanations of a behavior.
3. A symbolic model, which involves real or fictional characters displaying behaviors in books, films, television programs, or online media.

2. Mental states are important to learning.

Intrinsic Reinforcement

Bandura noted that external, environmental reinforcement was not the only factor to influence learning and behavior. He described intrinsic reinforcement as a form of internal reward, such as pride, satisfaction, and a sense of accomplishment. This emphasis on internal thoughts and cognitions helps connect learning theories to cognitive developmental theories. While many textbooks place social learning theory with behavioral theories, Bandura himself describes his approach as a 'social cognitive theory.'

3. Learning does not necessarily lead to a change in behavior.

While behaviorists believed that learning led to a permanent change in behavior, observational learning demonstrates that people can learn new information without demonstrating new behaviors.

The Modeling Process

Not all observed behaviors are effectively learned. Factors involving both the model and the learner can play a role in whether social learning is successful. Certain requirements and steps must also be followed. The following steps are involved in the observational learning and modeling process:

- **Attention:**
  In order to learn, you need to be paying attention. Anything that detracts your attention is going to have a negative effect on observational learning. If

the model interesting or there is a novel aspect to the situation, you are far more likely to dedicate your full attention to learning. *< student engagement*

- **Retention:**
  The ability to store information is also an important part of the learning process. Retention can be affected by a number of factors, but the ability to pull up information later and act on it is vital to observational learning.

- **Reproduction:**
  Once you have paid attention to the model and retained the information, it is time to actually perform the behavior you observed. Further practice of the learned behavior leads to improvement and skill advancement.

- **Motivation:**
  Finally, in order for observational learning to be successful, you have to be motivated to imitate the behavior that has been modeled. Reinforcement[3] and punishment[4] play an important role in motivation. While experiencing these motivators can be highly effective, so can observing other experience some type of reinforcement or punishment. For example, if you see another student rewarded with extra credit for being to class on time, you might start to show up a few minutes early each day.

Final Thoughts

In addition to influencing other psychologists, Bandura's social learning theory has had important implication in the field of eduction. Today, both teachers and parents recognize the importance of modeling appropriate behaviors. Other classroom strategies such as encouraging children and building self-efficacy[5] are also rooted in social learning theory.

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