

Course Name: Communication Theories-II

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Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory (1963), theorized by Albert Bandura, posits that people learn from one another, via observation, imitation, and modeling. The theory has often been called a bridge between behaviorist and cognitive learning theories because it encompasses attention, memory, and motivation.

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 behavior to observe and imitate, e.g., masculine and feminine, pro and anti-social, etc.

Children 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.

Reinforcement

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.

Identification

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.

Mediational Process

There are four mediational processes proposed by Bandura:

- 1. Attention:** The extent to which we are exposed/notice the behavior. For a behavior to be imitated, it has to grab our attention. We observe many behaviors on a daily basis, and many of these are not noteworthy. Attention is therefore extremely important in whether a behavior influences others imitating it.
- 2. Retention:** How well the behavior is remembered. The behavior may be noticed but is it not always remembered which obviously prevents imitation. It is important therefore that a memory of the behavior is formed to be performed later by the observer.

Much of social learning is not immediate, so this process is especially vital in those cases. Even if the behavior is reproduced shortly after seeing it, there needs to be a memory to refer to.

- 3. Reproduction:** This is the ability to perform the behavior that the model has just demonstrated. We see much behavior on a daily basis that we would like to be able to imitate but that this not always possible. We are limited by our physical ability and for that reason, even if we wish to reproduce the behavior, we cannot.

This influences our decisions whether to try and imitate it or not. Imagine the scenario of a 90-year-old-lady who struggles to walk watching Dancing on Ice. She may appreciate that the skill is a desirable one, but she will not attempt to imitate it because she physically cannot do it.

- 4. Motivation:** The will to perform the behavior. The rewards and punishment that follow a behavior will be considered by the observer. If the perceived rewards outweigh the perceived costs (if there are any), then the behavior will be more likely to be imitated by the observer. If the vicarious reinforcement is not seen to be important enough to the observer, then they will not imitate the behavior.