



SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY

Learning from observation, imitation and modelling

In this approach, there are three types of learning which are covered: classical conditioning and operant conditioning are two of them. The third type of learning is **social learning**, put forward by *social learning theory* which explains how learning can occur via observation, imitation and modelling.

It was **Bandura** who developed the model. He noticed that clearly there were some behaviours that weren't conditioned but appeared without conditioning. So social learning theory (alongside operant conditioning, not in the place of) suggests people learn by observing others – this is called **observational learning**. This is where people watch what others do and copy their actions, learning new behaviours. Observational learning includes:

1. The behaviour is *modelled* by a **role model** (this person could be a parent, peer or celebrity), who will always have some significance in the eyes of the observer
2. The observer **identifies** with the role model
3. The behaviour is **observed** and noticed
4. The behaviour is *learned* and **imitated** (whether or not it is repeated depends upon reinforcement)

Whether or not behaviour of a role model is imitated depends on how that is reinforced. For example, if they are rewarded for displaying that behaviour, it is likely to be repeated by the observer. But if they have been punished for showing that behaviour, it is less likely that they will imitate the role model, although not impossible.

Cognitive processes involved in observational learning

There are four cognitive processes which have been identified with social learning. When observing it is important that the behaviour is *observed*, and also *attended* to, and then that it is *stored* in memory, also that the behaviour is rewarded so that there is sufficient *motivation* to reproduce the action

The term **vicarious learning** is used to describe the process of **vicarious reinforcement**. This suggests that learning can occur from being reinforced through other people being reinforced. Social learning theory puts forward the idea that learning occurs from both **direct reinforcement** (operant conditioning) and **indirect reinforcement** (vicarious learning).

Examples of vicarious reinforcement include:

- *vicarious reinforcement* – a person works hard because a colleague has been rewarded for hard work
- *vicarious punishment* – someone does not park in a particular place because they have seen someone else receive a parking ticket for parking in that same place
- *vicarious extinction* – people stop doing something because they have seen that people are not rewarded for it

There are certain factors which can influence the likelihood of a role model being imitated by an observer via vicarious learning. One such factor is gender (observers are more likely to imitate *same-sex* models) and also age is another (observers are more likely to imitate those role models from the same age group). Also, it may depend on whether the observer can relate to the role model, this will depend on if they find themselves to be similar to that person. Similarly, behaviour is more likely to be copied if the role model is seen as important, powerful or prestigious.

Evaluation of social learning theory as an explanation of behaviour:

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| ✓ There is a lot of evidence from research which supports the theory and its suggestions, such as that of Bandura, Ross and Ross (1961) | ✗ It is difficult to test for observational learning, because the behaviour is often not exhibited immediately – it may be imitated a while after the learning has taken place |
| ✓ The theory is a good explanation which can be applied as a therapy, such as the treatments for OCD | ✗ Some of the research that has been conducted is on animals (see M8 Animal Experiments) |