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# SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY

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## Synonyms

Social Cognitive Theory; Observational Learning, **Social Development Theory**

## Definition

Social learning theory, or SLT, is predicated on the notion that learning occurs through social observation and subsequent imitation of modeled behavior. According to SLT, humans learn from observing the actions and resulting consequences of others. By doing so, individuals can learn to imitate the observed behavior, and thus reap the rewards, or they can learn *not* to imitate a particular action and thereby avoid the disagreeable consequences. Often seen as a bridge between both behaviorist and cognitive learning theories, social learning theory involves reciprocal interaction between cognitive, behavioral, and environmental influences (Pajares, 2002).

## Theoretical Background

Associated most notably with Albert Bandura, SLT has its roots in Rotter's *Social Learning and Clinical Psychology* (1954, **for related content see <http://psych.fullerton.edu/jmearns/rotter.htm>**). A quarter century later, Bandura expanded and refined Rotter's ideas in *Social Learning Theory* (1977). SLT is also related to Vygotsky's social development theory (1978, **for related content see <http://tip.psychology.org/vygotsky.html>**). SLT posits that learning best takes place in social contexts through observation, imitation, and modeling. At its inception, social learning theory challenged the

traditional principals of behaviorism and its perceived limitations as a learning theory. It called into question whether true learning could only result from the experiences of reinforcement or punishment, which was the prevailing behaviorist view of the time. Social learning theory also deviated from the basic tenets of behaviorism by espousing the importance of cognition, which had been excluded from the central ideas of behavioral theories, and by supporting the major role that cognitive approaches play in learning processes.

Social learning theory is based on Bandura's premise that learning does not always occur as a result of firsthand experiences alone, but through harnessing the power of observation and imitation (Martinez, 2010). Bandura states that through observing others, humans have the capacity to develop ideas about how new behaviors are performed. This information is then coded, stored into memory, and serves as a guide for action either immediately after the observation or for use on later occasions. The four major components, according to Bandura (1977), that comprise observational learning, or modeling include:

1. *Attention* – In order for learning to take place during observation, individuals must pay attention to the modeled behavior. Characteristics of both the observer and the person being observed (the model) can influence how much attention is given to the modeled activities. For example, an observer who is sleepy, sick, or otherwise distracted will not likely have the same level of attentiveness as an observer who is completely focused on the model.

2. *Retention* – If individuals are to learn from observed behavior, they must, in turn, remember the modeled activities. Retention and recall can be aided through the use of imagery and descriptive language, thus increasing the likelihood that the modeled behavior can be reproduced by the observer.

3. *Reproduction* – At this stage, the observer translates the modeled behavior into their appropriate individual actions. Reproducing the observed behavior involves converting the retained imagery and language, provided by the model, into a response that is in line with the modeled pattern. Behavioral reproduction improves as the observer practices the new behavior.

4. *Motivation* – Reproducing observed behavior requires some motivation to do so. Without some reason for imitating the modeled behavior, it is unlikely that individuals would make the effort.

Although the cornerstone of observational learning is attention, memory, and motivation, Bandura began to add to his work on modeling by also exploring the cognitive concept of self-efficacy beliefs as they relate to advancing the understanding of human behavior (Martinez, 2010). Self-efficacy is the belief in one's own capabilities. These beliefs can significantly influence one's environment and outcomes, and often determine whether or not someone is able to successfully perform specific actions (Foster, 2006; Martinez, 2010). Bandura's focus on self-efficacy pushed his social learning theory deeper into the cognitive realm; thus, "He coined the term social cognitive theory, holding that a person's behavior, environment and inner qualities interact, rather than one of them being predominant in explaining how people function" (Foster, 2006, para. 10).

## Important Scientific Research and Open Questions

Before the advent of social learning theory, behaviorist theories influenced the ways in which learning (i.e., behavior) was viewed. As the basic tenets of behaviorism were called into question, however, particularly those relating to reinforcement, punishment, and the exclusion of cognitive approaches, other views about learning began to emerge and directly challenged the foundation of behaviorist perspectives (Martinez, 2010). Albert Bandura, whose name has become synonymous with social learning theory, was one of the first to expand on the earlier ideas that cognition, and not merely behavior, is an important element of learning. In fact, according to Martinez (2010), Bandura's social learning theory requires neither *obvious* behavior on the part of the learner, nor any reinforcement or punishment, all of which are associated with behaviorist theories. The learning actually takes place through social observation.

A prime example of social observation at work is Bandura's Bobo doll experiment. During the experiment, children were exposed to both aggressive and nonaggressive models that played with the dolls either violently or placidly. The results revealed that the "subjects in the aggression condition reproduced a good deal of physical and verbal aggressive behavior resembling that of the models..." (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961, Results section, para. 1). The same was true for the subjects exposed to nonaggressive models. In other words, the children who were exposed to the nonaggressive model imitated similar nonaggressive behavior when playing with their Bobo doll. This experiment revealed that merely *observing* the behavior of a

model was enough to influence behavior, especially among children (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961, as cited in Martinez, 2010). This idea of observed/modeled behavior, particularly as it relates to influencing children's behavior, has sparked questions over whether exposure to violent/aggressive images in today's media (news, television programs, movies, video games, and social networks, to name a few) actually causes aggressive behavior in children. According to Kevin O'Rourke (2006), mass media plays a highly influential role in today's society, and thus, exposure to models represented in the media can have a powerful impact on shaping human behavior, especially aggressive behavior in children. In fact, research has shown that exposure to televised violence can increase children's aggressiveness within their lifetime, thus illustrating the significant role that social learning theory plays in influencing behavior and learning through observation (O'Rourke, 2006).

The work of the early pioneers of SLT has sparked more recent research in how social learning theory relates to such diverse areas as criminology and deviant behavior, advertising and consumer behavior, health and exercise, as well as technology and social media, to name a few. Currently, as SLT relates to criminology and deviant behavior, researchers continue to expound on the earlier work of Edwin Sutherland, Robert Burgess, and Ronald Akers. For example, Brauer (2009) states that through SLT, we can better understand how individuals learn criminal and deviant behavior, which is learned in much the same way as noncriminal behavior. In other words, through associations or social interactions, over time, with those who serve as a model for criminal and deviant behavior, individuals can learn to imitate the observed behavior, particularly in the absence of opposing positive influences or models to the contrary. Whether the deviant behavior is imitated or rejected by the observer is a result of either directly or vicariously experiencing the rewards or punishments of the modeled behavior.

Furthermore, researchers are presently examining SLT as it relates to advertising. Specifically, Kinard and Webster (2010) have explored the impact of advertising and Bandura's self-efficacy construct on unhealthy consumption behavior of adolescents, namely their use of tobacco and alcohol consumption. Advertising has long been thought to have a significant influence on individual behavior by using favorable stereotypes that are attractive, successful, and healthy. These positive images are widely used to depict

essentially risky and unhealthy consumer behaviors, such as smoking and alcohol consumption (Pechman & Knight, 2002; Pechman & Shih, 1999, as cited in Kinard & Webster, 2010). Adolescents tend to be particularly susceptible to these images, and thus are especially open to initially engaging in smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol as well as maintaining these behaviors throughout adolescence and into adulthood. Moreover, advertising has been shown to act as an additional model of behavior that reinforces the social influences of adolescents' parents and peers who smoke and drink. The added reinforcement provided by advertising increases the likelihood that the observed behaviors (i.e., smoking and drinking alcohol) will be imitated by adolescents.

Researchers continue to examine the established tenets of social learning theory and its application across a broad spectrum of areas, and the basic principles of SLT continue to hold true. In other words, to one degree or another, a great deal of individual learning takes place within a social context through observing and eventually imitating the behavior (positive or negative) of others. Although other complex factors, such as self-efficacy and the perceived rewards and/or punishments of the behavior, can influence the degree to which, if at all, the modeled behavior will be imitated by the observer(s), research (past and present) has shown that regardless of the domain, observation plays a powerful role in the learning process.

## Cross-References

- Observational Learning
- Social Learning
- Imitation and Behavior Modeling
- Self-efficacy

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