

It seems fair to say that of all the theoretical approaches presented and discussed in this book, social learning theory is the most familiar to the most people, researchers and laypersons alike. This is not to say, of course, that everybody gets it right—for example, one of us doubts that one of his brothers-in-law understands the nuances associated with different schedules of reinforcement! But, terms and ideas like *reinforcement*, *punishment*, *conditioning*, *Pavlovian conditioning*, *imitation*, and others, unlike much of the terminology of scientific research, are widely understood (at least in a general way). No doubt, some of this familiarity can be attributed to the long history of this theory; it can be traced to the English philosopher, John Locke, and even further back. However, longevity is not a sufficient explanation for general familiarity with the theory because most of the other theories we have discussed also have deep historical roots.

We believe that the general appeal and awareness of the basics of social learning theory and its precursor, learning theory, are attributable to several factors. First, throughout the 1900s there was extensive research on various particular branches of the learning theory tree (broadly, *classical conditioning*, first systematically articulated by the Russian, Pavlov, and then by an American, Watson, and *instrumental* or *operant*

or *Skinnerian conditioning*, developed by B. F. Skinner). Second, from its inception, this research and the learning theory supporting it have been linked very directly to practical applications of individual and family life, such as how children develop skills and competencies, how parents become “good” or “bad” parents, and how people develop fears and phobias. We hypothesize that another reason for the general familiarity with this theory in America is that its basic tenet, that people can change and that there are specific mechanisms that can be identified and implemented to effect that change, is ingrained in the American system of values.

As you already know from whatever basic course you may have had in psychology or human development or, indeed, from your general attentiveness to life, according to learning theory, stated in its simplest form, individuals choose or increase behaviors that are likely to have positive consequences and avoid those that are likely to have negative consequences. Essentially, rewards shape and increase behaviors, and punishments decrease behaviors—although this does not happen automatically. Obviously, there are all kinds of issues that make the matter not so straightforward. For example, the timing of rewards and punishments in relation to the behavior(s) in question influences how well and for how long they work; the individual’s prior

life history makes some things rewarding that may not be rewarding for others; the context in which the behaviors, rewards, and punishments occur is influential; and, perhaps most important, the things that are called rewards and punishments serve *informative* and *motivational* functions for the person. That is, people observe their own behavior and its consequences and they notice the impact their behavior has on others (the informative function). As Bandura notes, this guides future action. In addition, because of their cognitive (thinking) capacities, people can anticipate future consequences of behavior (the motivational function). The research literature on learning research and theory is as extensive as that for any of the other theories in this book.

Since learning theory is a general theory, many of the same basic principles apply to animals as they do to humans. "However, the cognitive capacities of humans enable them to profit more extensively from experience than if they were unthinking organisms" (Bandura, 1977, p. 17). In addition, this allows people to learn vicariously to a highly refined and significant extent (but don't give your fellow humans too much credit; lion cubs learn vicariously too!). This vicarious, or observational, learning is the bridge to social learning theory: It is learning that occurs from observing the behavior of others and then reproducing that behavior. It is important to note that the reproduction of the observed behavior may or may not be seen immediately (see the Mihalic and Elliott reading in this chapter), and that the imitation of what has been observed can be practiced by thinking about it as well as by doing it.

Bandura (1977, p. 23) provided a schematic representation of the key features of observational learning. We highlight the major element here.

The event or behavior to be modeled (say, the way a father expresses affection) leads to *imitation*, or "*matching performances*." (Did you ever "practice" something you saw your mom, dad, or a teacher do?) But what things must occur for the observer to successfully and accurately replicate (imitate) or reproduce what has been observed? It is not automatic (as in general learning theory,

learning is not automatic). Here are some of the necessary *intervening variables* that must occur if the observed (modeled) behavior is to be reproduced:

1. *Attentional Processes*: Essentially, the observer must be tuned in to the model and the model must be distinctive and of some relevance to the observer.
2. *Retention Processes*: The observer must be capable of symbolically encoding information, reproducing the information, and practicing it mentally and motorically.
3. *Physical or Motor Reproduction Processes*: The observer must have the physical abilities, the ability to self-observe and self-evaluate attempts to imitate or reproduce, and the availability of component elements needed to reproduce the behavior.
4. *Motivational Processes*: Reinforcement of several types—self, vicarious, and external—must be present to facilitate the observer's interest in paying attention to and reproducing the behavior.

We hope that the above brief summary of the observational learning process makes it clearer that many things happen between the observation and the reproduction of a given behavior. The intervening variables are all required to one degree or another for observational learning to occur. However, you should not construe that our presentation of the social learning model indicates that all research issues and implications of this perspective are settled (but, of course, you know from Chapter 1 of this book that that is impossible—right?). Indeed, there have been literally thousands of studies on all aspects of the social learning model, and this work continues across many areas of importance for children and for families.

As alluded to earlier, the perspective expounded by social learning theory is virtually commonplace in discussions of parenting, child development, family interactions, intergenerational family functioning, and numerous other areas of individual development and family life. For example, how many times have you heard parents say they do

things as parents that their own parents did with them? Why do parents not want to smoke or curse in front of young children? What does it mean when your mother says, "Wait until you have kids; you'll see how easy it is!"? Take a look at the two readings in this chapter that address similar questions.

THE READINGS

The readings in this chapter use social learning theory to guide their focuses on the issue of marital violence (Mihalic & Elliot, 1997) and on the intergenerational transmission of constructive parenting (Chen & Kaplan, 2001). The latter article integrates social learning theory with several other perspectives including symbolic interaction theory (Chapter 8), attachment theory, and social participation concepts to explain the consistent research finding that parents tend to use the same kinds of parenting practices that they experienced from their own parents. Chen and Kaplan addressed some of the problems inherent in retrospective studies by employing a research design that used longitudinal data over a period of two decades. In addition, important social learning concepts concerning the ability to retain what is observed for long periods of time and then to imitate those stored memories in a "mechanized" manner received empirical support in this study. Mihalic and Elliott (1997) show directly why a chapter on social learning theory deserves a place in a book of theories that focuses on family and individual development. Their focus is on family violence. Although they clearly acknowledge that their study tests a simplistic model of the relationship between exposure to family violence and the subsequent production of violence, their study does show that social learning theory provides a

generally good explanation for some family violence. In one sense, Mihalic and Elliott's work is an extension of Crosbie-Burnett and Lewis's (1993) excellent discussion on social and cognitive-behavioral contributions to understanding families. These authors make a pretty clear case that the basic concepts of social learning theory—modeling, imitation, ability to delay reproduction of observed behaviors, and so forth—which are so widely applicable to individual development, present a powerful tool for family researchers to enhance their understanding of a variety of family issues.

ISSUES FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

1. What are some family development issues that might be particularly well-suited to study from a social learning perspective?
2. After reading the following articles and Chapter 5 on social exchange theory, discuss how to integrate ideas from social learning theory with ideas from social exchange theory to explain some aspect of child development or some aspect of multigenerational family life. What are some of the similarities and differences between social exchange theory and social learning theory?
3. What other theories in this book might be productively used to investigate the issues that Chen and Kaplan pursued?

FURTHER READING

Akers (1996), Bandura (1977), Bandura (1986), Crosbie-Burnett and Lewis (1993).