

Albert Bandura Developing Social Learning Theory

Albert Bandura's social learning theory, which he first developed while working at Stanford University in the 1950s, rests on the proposition that learning occurs not only through the effects of one's own direct actions, but also by means of modeling (or imitation). Put simply, we learn by observing others. The 1961 Bobo doll experiment, one of the most famous in the history of psychology, provides strong evidence to support this contention.

Bandura and his colleagues exposed children between the ages of three and six to an adult model—an actor—behaving violently toward a Bobo doll. They hypothesized that this group of children would manifest higher levels of aggression than a control group when allowed to play with a Bobo doll themselves later on. The results of the experiment confirmed the hypothesis; the children exposed to the violent model tended to reproduce exactly the behavior they had witnessed.

Although the basic premise of social learning theory is straightforward, there is complexity in the detail. Bandura identified a number of factors that have to be in place for successful learning to occur. If you want to learn, then you have to attend to the behavior being modeled. You also have to retain the information you have witnessed, which relies on it being codified, and which is facilitated by mental rehearsal. Having retained the information, you have to be able to reproduce it. And finally, you have to be motivated to reproduce the behavior you have learned.

Motivation is key to explaining the distinction between learning and performance. Reinforcement and punishment are important motivators, even when experienced merely vicariously. In a 1965 Bobo doll experiment, Bandura found that children who had witnessed the violent model being reprimanded for his behavior were much less likely to reproduce the violent behavior themselves when playing with the doll later on. According to Bandura, this shows that while reinforcement and punishment are not necessary for learning to occur, they can be necessary for performance. Bandura's social learning theory has been hugely influential. In particular, it has been deployed in order to explore the effects of the media on aggression and antisocial behavior.

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