

# THE LEARNING APPROACH: SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY

## THE SPECIFICATION SAYS...

Social learning theory including imitation, identification, modelling, vicarious reinforcement, the role of mediational processes and Bandura's research.

Albert Bandura proposed social learning theory as a development of the behaviourist approach. He argued that classical and operant conditioning could not account for all human learning – there are important mental processes that mediate between stimulus and response.

## KEY TERMS

**Social learning theory** – A way of explaining behaviour that includes both direct and indirect reinforcement, combining learning theory with the role of cognitive factors.

**Imitation** – Copying the behaviour of others.

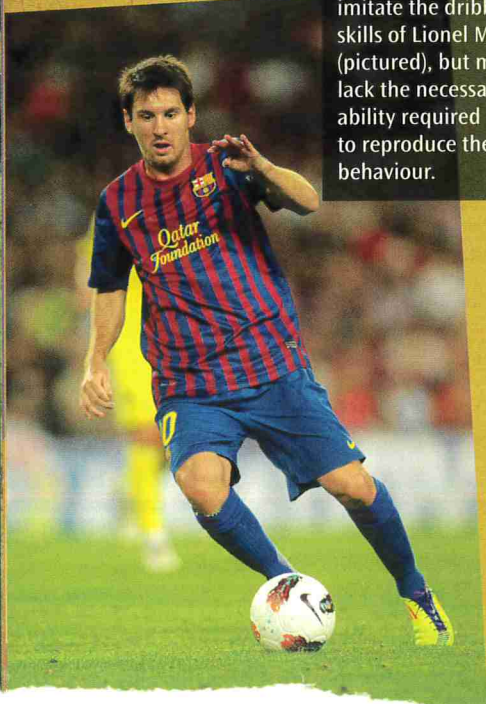
**Identification** – When an observer associates themselves with a role model and wants to be like the role model.

**Modelling** – From the observer's perspective, modelling is imitating the behaviour of a role model. From the role model's perspective, modelling is the precise demonstration of a specific behaviour that may be imitated by an observer.

**Vicarious reinforcement** – Reinforcement which is not directly experienced but occurs through observing someone else being reinforced for a behaviour. This is a key factor in imitation.

**Mediational processes** – Cognitive factors (i.e. thinking) that influence learning and come between stimulus and response.

A child may want to imitate the dribbling skills of Lionel Messi (pictured), but may lack the necessary ability required to reproduce the behaviour.



## Social learning theory

### Assumptions

Albert Bandura agreed with the **behaviourists** that much of our behaviour is learned from experience. However, his **social learning theory (SLT)** proposed a different way in which people learn: through observation and **imitation** of others within a social context, thus *social learning*. SLT suggested that learning occurs directly, through classical and operant conditioning, but also *indirectly*.

### Vicarious reinforcement

For indirect learning to take place an individual observes the behaviour of others. The learner may imitate this behaviour but, in general, imitation only occurs if the behaviour is seen to be rewarded (reinforced) rather than punished, i.e. **vicarious reinforcement** occurs (see box below). Thus, the learner observes a behaviour but most importantly observes the consequences of a behaviour.

### The role of mediational processes

SLT is often described as the 'bridge' between traditional **learning theory** (previous spread) and the **cognitive approach** (next spread) because it focuses on how mental (cognitive) factors are involved in learning. These mental factors mediate (i.e. intervene) in the learning process to determine whether a new response is acquired. Four mental or **mediational processes** in learning were identified by Bandura:

1. **Attention** – the extent to which we notice certain behaviours.
2. **Retention** – how well the behaviour is remembered.
3. **Motor reproduction** – the ability of the observer to perform the behaviour.
4. **Motivation** – the will to perform the behaviour, which is often determined by whether the behaviour was rewarded or punished.

The first two of these relate to the *learning* of behaviour and the last two to the *performance* of behaviour. Unlike traditional behaviourism, the learning and performance of behaviour need not occur together. Observed behaviours may be stored by the observer and reproduced at a later time.

### Identification

People (especially children) are much more likely to imitate the behaviour of people with whom they *identify*, called **role models**. This process is called **modelling**. A person becomes a role model if they are seen to possess similar characteristics to the observer and/or are attractive and have high status. Role models may not necessarily be physically present in the environment, and this has important implications for the influence of the media on behaviour (see facing page).

## Apply it

### Concepts: Do children imitate what they see?

(A) Bandura *et al.* (1961) recorded the behaviour of young children who watched an adult behave in an aggressive way towards a Bobo doll (see right). The adult hit the doll with a hammer and shouted abuse at it.

When these children were later observed playing with various toys, including a Bobo doll, they behaved much more aggressively towards the doll and the other toys than those who had observed a non-aggressive adult.

**Question:** Which aspect of SLT does study A illustrate?

(B) Bandura and Walters (1963) showed videos to children where an adult behaved aggressively towards the Bobo doll. One group of children saw the adult praised for their behaviour (being told 'Well done'). A second group saw the adult punished for their aggression towards the doll, by being told off. The third group (**control group**) saw the aggression without any consequence.

When given their own Bobo doll to play with, the first group showed much more aggression, followed by the third group, and then the second.

**Question:** Which aspect of SLT does study B illustrate?



## Evaluation

### The importance of cognitive factors in learning

Neither classical nor operant conditioning can offer an adequate account of learning on their own. Humans and many animals store information about the behaviour of others and use this to make judgements about when it is appropriate to perform certain actions. As Bandura observed:

*'Learning would be exceedingly laborious, not to mention hazardous, if people had to rely solely on the effects of their own actions to inform them what to do. From observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviours are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide to action'* (Bandura 1977).

As such, SLT provides a more comprehensive explanation of human learning by recognising the role of mediational processes.

### Over-reliance on evidence from lab studies

Many of Bandura's ideas were developed through observation of young children's behaviour in **lab** settings. Lab studies are often criticised for their contrived nature where participants may respond to **demand characteristics**. It has been suggested, in relation to the Bobo doll research (bottom of facing page) that, because the main purpose of the doll is to strike it, the children were simply behaving in a way that they thought was expected.

Thus the research may tell us little about how children actually learn aggression in everyday life.

### Underestimates the influence of biological factors

Bandura makes little reference to the impact of biological factors on social learning. One consistent finding in the Bobo doll experiments was that boys were often more aggressive than girls regardless of the specifics of the experimental situation. This may be explained by **hormonal** factors, such as differences in levels of **testosterone**, a hormone that is present in greater quantities in boys than girls and which is linked to increased aggressive behaviour.

This means that this important influence on behaviour is not accounted for in SLT.

## Evaluation eXtra

### Explains cultural differences in behaviour

Social learning theory has the advantage of being able to explain cultural differences in behaviour. Social learning principles can account for how children learn from other individuals around them, as well as through the media, and this can explain how cultural norms are transmitted through particular societies. This has proved useful in understanding a range of behaviours, such as how children come to understand their gender role.

**Consider:** How could the learning of gender-appropriate behaviour be explained by social learning theory? Why would the biological approach have difficulty accounting for cultural differences in gender behaviour?

### Less determinist than the behaviourist approach

Bandura emphasised **reciprocal determinism**, in the sense that we are not merely influenced by our external environment, but we also exert an influence upon it, through the behaviours we choose to perform. This element of choice suggests that there is some **free will** in the way we behave.

**Consider:** Why is this a less determinist position than that suggested by the behaviourist approach? In what way is this preferable?

## Apply it

### Concepts: Video nasties

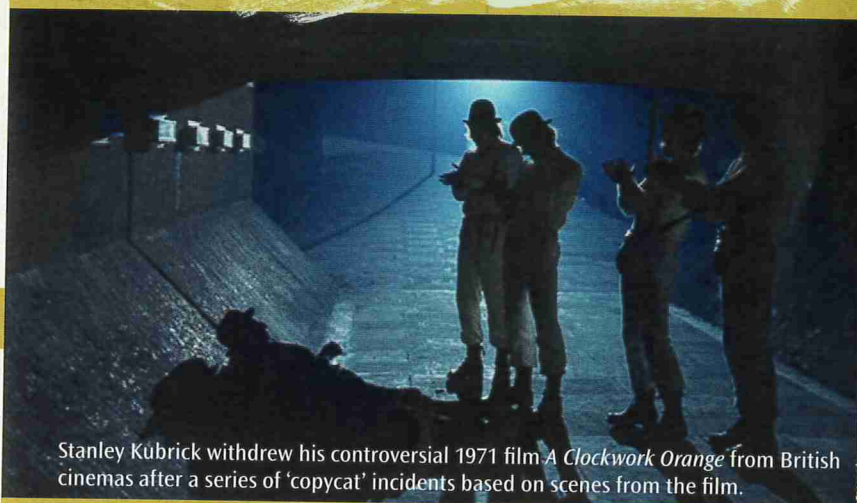
Bandura's Bobo doll experiments have implications for the media – are children, and indeed some adults, influenced by the violence and aggression they see on television, in movies and video games?

This debate was brought into sharp focus in 1990 following the death of James Bulger, a toddler from Liverpool murdered by two ten-year-old boys. At the time it was argued by many UK newspapers that the child killers were inspired by the horror film *Child's Play 3*, and there were many calls for rules and censorship on such 'video nasties' to be tightened.

However, many researchers dispute the link between the media and real-life violence. For example, Guy Cumberbatch (2001) argues that supposed 'video nasties', of the type cited in the Bulger case, are much more likely to frighten children than to make them frightening (aggressive) towards others. He argues that isolated incidents such as these are better explained by other factors such as social deprivation, child abuse and early exposure to violence in the home.

### Questions

1. Using social learning principles explain why media (such as violent videos) may potentially have a negative impact on children's behaviour.
2. How might the media vicariously reinforce violence and aggression?



Stanley Kubrick withdrew his controversial 1971 film *A Clockwork Orange* from British cinemas after a series of 'copycat' incidents based on scenes from the film.

### STUDY TIPS

- If you need to evaluate social learning theory you might, for example, use the Bobo doll studies (or other studies) to illustrate key points. However, you should keep descriptions of the procedures and findings within these studies to a minimum and instead make it clear how the implications/conclusions from these studies support (or contradict) key SLT concepts.

### CHECK IT

1. Outline what is meant by the term *identification* in relation to the social learning theory approach. [2 marks]
2. Explain **one** limitation of the social learning theory approach. [3 marks]
3. Outline and evaluate the social learning theory approach. Refer to the behaviourist approach as part of your evaluation. [12 marks AS, 16 marks AL]