

## *Social Learning Theory*

- Albert Bandura was the major motivator behind social learning theory. One of the main things that he was concerned with was how cognitive factors influence development, but he confined his approach to the behavioural tradition. Bandura called his theory a social cognitive theory. Like other behaviourists, Bandura believes that cognitive development alone cannot explain changes in behaviour in childhood and he believed that learning processes are primarily responsible for children's development. However, he felt quite strongly that the cognitive abilities of the child affect learning processes. This, he feels, is especially true of the more complex types of learning. So, how does Bandura handle the child's learning?

### **Observational Learning**

- The problem, Bandura left, with classical and operant conditioning is that it has great difficulty explaining how it is that children acquire new behaviours simply by watching someone else and copying them. Also, a child does not have to be reinforced herself for the behaviour to be learned, it is enough for the child to see someone else being rewarded. Neither of these can be satisfactorily explained by a type of learning (like operant conditioning) that relies on the child experiencing the direct consequences of her actions. Bandura could explain this easily by proposing a different type of learning: **observational learning**. Bandura claimed that children's learning is heavily reliant on observation. Who do children observe and model themselves on? Initially parents and siblings and eventually friends, teachers, sporting heroes, TV characters . . . even cartoon characters! Just about anyone will do! So, Bandura would claim that the child who has seen her parents being kind and caring, giving to charity, caring for the environment, being kind to animals, will tend to be the same. However, the child who has seen problems being faced with violence, arguments occurring, wrongdoing being punished by hitting, will tend to grow up to be more aggressive etc. They will learn violent ways of addressing the world. Grusec et al (1978) found telling children to be generous made no difference, showing generosity did make a difference though. This is evidence that "do as I say not as I do" will not work.
- We have already covered the major factors influencing imitation (Appropriateness, Relevance, Similarity, Friendliness, Reward, Powerfulness, Consistency). One of the most powerful of these influencing factors is Reward. Bandura called this **vicarious (substituted) reinforcement**. What he meant is that the child observes someone else being rewarded for a particular behaviour and this affects the child in the same way as it would had the child produced the behaviour herself and been rewarded for it. Similarly, **vicarious punishment** is possible where the child observes a model being punished for a behaviour and is less likely to produce the behaviour because of this observation. So, imitation is most likely to occur if the model has received vicarious reinforcement for the behaviour and less likely to occur (this is called **response inhibition** or **counterimitation**) if the model has received vicarious punishment for the behaviour. Of course, you have to bear in

mind, as we have mentioned before, that what is reinforcing for one child may be punishing for another and vice versa. Developing a strategy of making the child see people being punished for undesirable behaviours will not necessarily work!

- One thing that Bandura found in his early studies is that children do not always immediately show the learned behaviour. Bandura (1965) showed a group of children a model who was rewarded for displaying new aggressive behaviours towards an inflated clown (BoBo). A second group of children were shown the same aggressive behaviours, but this time the behaviours were punished. When the children were later given the chance to play with the clown, those who had seen the behaviour rewarded showed many of the model's aggressive behaviours, whereas the ones who had seen the behaviours punished did not. However, when these same children were later offered rewards for displaying these aggressive behaviours they did so without difficulty! Bandura interpreted this as suggesting that all the children had learned the behaviours but vicarious punishment had inhibited the responses of some of the children. This distinction between acquisition and performance has been of great interest to researchers studying the potential effects on children (and adults) of viewing violence on TV. We'll come back to this later.
- Bandura believes that learning by observation involves four separate processes: OHP.
- So, when thinking about a child's behaviour, think about what might influence their behaviour and what might stop them imitating. So, tell me, according to the model why might you find that a child does not imitate a behaviour. According to Bandura's model, a child will not imitate everything s/he sees because attention may have wandered, they might not remember the correct information, they might not have the skills for reproducing the behaviour and they might not have seen the behaviour rewarded.
- **STRENGTHS & WEAKNESSES.** One interesting point brought up by Bee (1992) is that this kind of theory can easily handle inconsistencies in the child's behaviour (reinforced at school, not at home = well-behaved at school, not at home). This view of behaviour is extremely optimistic: it suggests that given the right environment, any behaviour can be changed: you would never write anyone off if you agreed with this theory. Another strength is that it gives an accurate picture of the way behaviours are learned: clearly, children (and adults) do copy other's behaviour's behaviour. A further strength is the cognitive element of Bandura's theory because it might offer a way to eventually integrate the learning theory and cognitive development approaches.
- What are its weaknesses? Too much emphasis placed on what happens to the child rather than what the child does with the information s/he has. Secondly, such theories do not take into account the actual development changes (physical and mental) that occur as the child matures.