

Observational Learning

Observational learning, method of learning that consists of observing and modelling another individual's behaviour, attitudes, or emotional expressions. Although it is commonly believed that the observer will copy the model, American psychologist Albert Bandura stressed that individuals may simply learn from the behaviour rather than imitate it. Observational learning is a major component of Bandura's social learning theory. He also emphasized that four conditions were necessary in any form of observing and modelling behaviour: attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation.

Conditions for observational learning

Attention

If an organism is going to learn anything from a model, he or she must be paying attention to it and the behaviour it exhibits. Many conditions can affect the observer's attention. For instance, if the observer is sleepy, ill, or distracted, he or she will be less likely to learn the modelled behaviour and imitate it at a later date. In addition, the characteristics of the model have an influence on the observer's attention. Bandura and others have shown that humans pay more attention to models that are attractive, similar to them, or prestigious and are rewarded for their behaviours. This explains the appeal that athletes have on the behaviour of young children and that successful adults have on college students. Unfortunately, this aspect of modelling can also be used in detrimental ways. For example, if young children witness gang members gaining status or money, they may imitate those behaviours in an effort to gain similar rewards.

Retention

The second requirement of observational learning is being able to remember the behaviour that was witnessed. If the human or animal does not remember the behaviour, there is a less than probable chance that they will imitate it.

Reproduction

This requisite of behaviour concerns the physical and mental ability of the individual to copy the behaviour he or she observed. For instance, a young child may observe a college basketball player dunk a ball. Later, when the child has a basketball, he or she may attempt to dunk a ball just like the college player. However, the young child is not nearly as physically developed as the older college player and, no matter how many times he or she tries, will not be able to reach the basket to dunk the ball. An older child or an adult might be able to dunk the ball but likely only after quite a bit of practice. Similarly, a young colt observes another horse in the herd jump over the creek while running in the pasture. After observing the model's jumping behaviour, the colt attempts to do the same only to land in the middle of the creek. He simply was not big enough or did not have long enough legs to clear the water. He could, however, after physical growth and some practice, eventually be able to replicate the other horse's jump.

Motivation

Perhaps the most important aspect of observational learning involves motivation. If the human or animal does not have a reason for imitating the behaviour, then no amount of attention, retention, or reproduction will overcome the lack of motivation. Bandura identified several motivating factors for imitation. These include knowing that the model was previously reinforced for the behaviour, being offered an incentive to perform, or observing the model receiving reinforcement for the behaviour. These factors can also be negative motivations. For instance, if the observer knew that the model was punished for the behaviour, was threatened for exhibiting the behaviour, or observed the model being punished for the behaviour, then the probability of mimicking the behaviour is less.

Applications of observational learning

Modelling has been used successfully in many therapeutic conditions. Many therapists have used forms of modelling to assist their patients to overcome phobias. For example, adults with claustrophobia may observe a model in a video as they move closer and closer to an enclosed area before entering it. Once the model reaches the enclosed area, for instance a closet, he or she will open the door, enter it, and then close the door. The observer will be taught relaxation techniques and be told to practice them anytime he or she becomes anxious while watching the film. The end result is to continue observing the model until the person can enter the closet himself or herself.

Bandura's findings in the Bobo doll experiments have greatly influenced children's television programming. Bandura filmed his students physically attacking the Bobo doll, an inflatable doll with a rounded bottom that pops back up when knocked down. A student was placed in the room with the Bobo doll. The student punched the doll, yelled "sockeroo" at it, kicked it, hit it with hammers, and sat on it. Bandura then showed this film to young children. Their behaviour was taped when in the room with the doll. The children imitated the behaviours of the student and at times even became more aggressive toward the doll than what they had observed. Another group of young children observed a student being nice to the doll. Ironically, this group of children did not imitate the positive interaction of the model. Bandura conducted a large number of varied scenarios of this study and found similar events even when the doll was a live clown. These findings have prompted many parents to monitor the television shows their children watch and the friends or peers with which they associate. Unfortunately, the parental saying "Do as I say, not as I do" does not hold true for children. Children are more likely to imitate the behaviours versus the instructions of their parents.

One of the most famous instances of observational learning in animals involves the blue tit, a small European bird. During the 1920s and through the 1940s, many people reported that the cream from the top of the milk being delivered to their homes was being stolen. The cream-stealing incidents spread all over Great Britain. After much speculation about the missing cream, it was discovered that the blue tit was the culprit. Specifically, one bird had learned to peck through the foil top of the milk container and suck the cream out of the bottle. It did not take long before other blue tit birds imitated the behaviour and spread it through the country.