Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory states that behaviour is learned from the environment through the process of observational learning. Children observe the people around them behaving in various ways. This is illustrated during the famous Bobo doll experiment (Bandura, 1961).

Individuals that are observed are called models. In society children are surrounded by many influential models, such as parents within the family, characters on children’s TV, friends within their peer group and teachers at school. These models provide examples of masculine and feminine behaviour to observe and imitate.

They pay attention to some of these people (models) and encode their behaviour. At a later time they may imitate (i.e. copy) the behaviour they have observed. They may do this regardless of whether the behaviour is ‘gender appropriate’ or not but there are a number of processes that make it more likely that a child will reproduce the behaviour that its society deems appropriate for its sex.

First, the child is more likely to attend to and imitate those people it perceives as similar to itself. Consequently, it is more likely to imitate behaviour modelled by people the same sex as it is.

Second, the people around the child will respond to the behaviour it imitates with either reinforcement or punishment. If a child imitates a model’s behaviour and the consequences are rewarding, the child is likely to continue performing the behaviour. Behaviour has been reinforced (i.e. strengthened).

Reinforcement can be external or internal and can be positive or negative. If a child wants approval from parents or peers, this approval is an external reinforcement, but feeling happy about being approved of is an internal reinforcement. A child will behave in a way which it believes will earn approval because it desires approval.

Positive (or negative) reinforcement will have little impact if the reinforcement offered externally does not match with an individual’s needs. Reinforcement can be positive or negative, but the important factor is that it will usually lead to a change in a person’s behaviour.

Third, the child will also take into account of what happens to other people when deciding whether or not to copy someone’s actions. This is known as vicarious reinforcement.

Identification occurs with another person (the model) and involves taking on (or adopting) observed behaviours, values, beliefs and attitudes of the person with whom you are identifying.

The term identification as used by Social Learning Theory is similar to the Freudian term related to the Oedipus complex. For example, they both involve internalizing or adopting another person’s behaviour. However, during the Oedipus complex the child can only identify with the same sex parent, whereas with Social Identity Theory the person (child or adult) can potentially identify with any other person.

Identification is different to imitation as it may involve a number of behaviours being adopted whereas imitation usually involves copying a single behaviour.