The social learning approach: the basics

What assumptions do social learning theorist make?

Social learning theorists share many assumptions with behaviourists, particularly the belief that people are shaped in fundamental ways by their **environment** through **learning** processes. Social learning theorists also acknowledge that classical and operant **conditioning** are an important influence on human behaviour. However, they add to these learning processes a third: **observational learning**. They believe people learn by observing others and therefore that other people (the **social environment**) are particularly important as an influence on behaviour. With the emphasis on observational learning comes a belief that it is impossible to explain human behaviour without considering the role of internal, **mental processes** in human behaviour, something that behaviourists reject.

How do social learning theorists explain human behaviour?

Observational learning involves a number of cognitive and behavioural processes. In order to learn the behaviour of another, the person must first pay **attention** to what the other person (called a model) is doing. They must then **encode** and form a memory of the behaviour the model performs. At a later time, this memory must be translated back into a behaviour so that the observer may **imitate** it. In order to imitate the behaviour effectively the observer may need to **practise** it. Whether or not the observer actually makes use of the behaviour they have learned depends on whether they are motivated to do so. The observer's **motivation** may be affected by several factors, principally, whether they believe that reinforcement is available if they imitate. Their beliefs may be influenced by the consequences of their past behaviour (as in behaviourism) but also by the **observed consequences** of the model's behaviour. If the model is observed to be reinforced for their actions, then imitation becomes more likely, assuming that the observer values the reinforcer that the model was observed to get. Conversely, if the model is observed to be punished then imitation becomes less likely (these processes are called **vicarious reinforcement** and punishment).

A number of factors besides reinforcement and punishment influence whether a particular person is likely to be selected as a model and imitated. Models are more likely to be imitated if the observer perceives them to be **similar** to themselves. Imitation is also more likely when the model has **high status** and is **attractive** and when the observer has **low self-esteem**.

How do social learning theorists study human behaviour?

Social learning theorists share with behaviourists a commitment to the **scientific method**. They favour objective, **quantitative** approaches to research and use the **experimental method** if possible. Unlike behaviourists they do not study animal learning. They conduct research in any context in which learning occurs, particularly favouring research using **children**, whose behaviour is more obviously influenced by the people around them than adults' (although adults also learn through observation). Social learning research therefore may include **observation** of children and adults in school and family settings. However, the **laboratory** setting is favoured by many researchers because of the opportunities it gives to isolate and examine the causal effects of different influences on observational learning.

An example of this approach comes from the studies carried out by **Albert Bandura** on the social learning of aggressive behaviours. Bandura (1965) showed children a film of an adult behaving aggressively towards an inflatable toy called a bobo doll. Some children saw the aggressive adult being reinforced by another adult, others saw them being punished and a control group saw the model behaving aggressively with no positive or negative consequences. Afterwards the children

were given the opportunity to play with a range of toys including a bobo doll. It was found that those who had seen the model getting punished were much less likely to imitate the aggressive actions, showing the influence of vicarious punishment on imitation.

Evaluation of social learning theory

Its commitment to scientific methods is a strength of the social learning approach as its research studies are **reliable** and allow inferences about **cause and effect** to be drawn. However, this does give rise to the criticism that it relies heavily on research conducted in rather a**rtificial** settings. For example, some critics argue that the behaviour of the children in Bandura's studies was significantly influenced by **demand characteristics** and that they were, in effect, deliberately producing the behaviour they thought the experimenters wanted to see.

Because the social learning approach takes into account the **cognitive factors** that mediate between stimuli and responses, it addresses one of the most important criticisms of behaviourism: its neglect of thinking processes. Consequently, social learning theory can explain a range of processes that behaviourism has difficulties with, especially behaviours that emerge without the person that produces them being directly conditioned. As such it has contributed significantly to our understanding of processes like **aggression** and gender development and has also formed the basis of a range of **treatments** for problems like phobias. Modelling-based therapies are particularly effective with children, who may find behaviour therapies using direct conditioning hard to deal with.

Some criticisms of social learning theory arise from their commitment to the environment as the chief influence on behaviour. For example, there are several gender differences that appear to be universal, such as preferences for particular characteristics in a potential heterosexual partner (men prioritise youth and fertility, women prioritise status and resources) and differences in the gender thinking of boys and girls (boys tend to be more rigid) that social learning theory cannot account for. It may be that differences like these reflect **genetic influences** on behaviour that social learning theory takes no account of.

Social learning theory and key debates

Although the approach appears less mechanistic than behaviourism, social learning theorists generally do not believe in free will, and take a **deterministic** view of human behaviour. Their emphasis on the role of cognitive and motivational factors may appear to give freedom of choice a role in behaviour, but it should be remembered that a person's motivation is the product of learning that took place at an earlier time and that therefore their 'choices' are not free. They share with the behaviourists a tendency to favour the **nurture** side of the nature-nurture debate, although it is generally assumed that the capacity for observational learning must be innate. Like behaviorism and other scientific approaches to psychology, social learning theory is **nomological** in its outlook and holds the similarities between people to be more important than the differences. Along with the nomological outlook comes a **reductionist** approach to explaining behaviour, whereby even the most complex things that people do are explained in terms of relatively simple fundamental processes of learning.