# BARE ESSENTIALS OF SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY

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## Overview

Social learning ideas are valuable to understand, predict, and influence individual behavior, and as underpinning in a unified practice theory. It is through the contingencies of social learning—cues, cognitions, and consequences—that we can best understand individual behavior. Basic assumptions about learning are also a part of exchange theory, and they are significant in explaining construction of reality.

Self and personality are defined in social learning theory as repertoires of complex behavior patterns, primarily products of learning history. The self, in a reciprocal relationship with the environment, can launch counter-controlling initiatives that offset external forces. It is this capacity, among others, that demonstrates the basis for exchange relationships.

New behavior is learned mostly by the operation of contingencies in the observation of models. Whether modeling is planned or inadvertent, it is a pervasive influence in practice.

Social learning explanations do not fully account for behavior that creates ideological meanings, nor do they illuminate the playback of ideology on its creators. These matters may be explicated as a part of the social construction of reality.

## Respondent & Operant Behavior

The distinction of social learning theory for understanding what individuals do is a preoccupation with verifiable acts. The theory does not deny inner psychological or biological processes, but it does reject unobserved, unverifiable mental states. While environmental forces are powerful in learning, thinking and emotion are equally important.
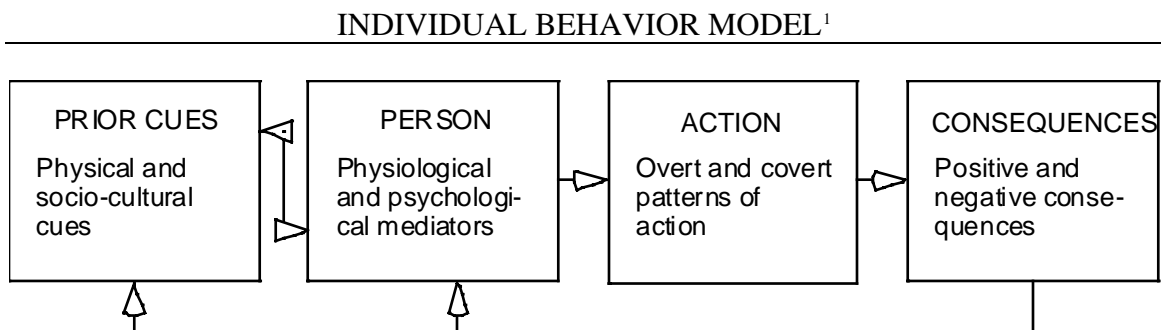
Two types of behavior are identified in learning, respondent and operant. Respondent behavior is learned through prior cues and is generally thought of as emotional. Naturally pain- or pleasure-producing cues exist in the everyday world—other people, circumstances, information, etc.—that condition responses. These can also be paired with neutral elements in the environment that then acquire a similar capacity to arouse pain or pleasure. A citizen who once attempted to speak out at a public hearing and was belittled by an arrogant official may feel uncomfortable when entering the same building in the future. The neutral public building assumes a negative value by pairing with the unpleasant personal attack. On the other hand, a newly emerging citizen activist who participates in a protest demonstration that succeeds in gaining concessions may in the future have pleasant feelings in planning a mobilization. Respondent behavior, then, is what we generally call emotional and is understood in environmental cues that precede it in time.

It is operant behavior, however, that is of special interest to community organizers. Behavior that changes the environment, thereby producing rewards or punishments for the actor, is termed operant. It involves easily visible actions (walking, talking, etc.) that are under conscious self-control, and it is influenced mainly by consequences that follow it in time.

The review of social learning begins with the contingencies of operant behavior, the events on which such behavior is contingent. After that we cover social learning ideas about the self, modeling, and the interaction of social learning and ideology.

## Contingencies of Learning

The social learning view of behavior is that people are neither impelled to act by inner forces nor buffeted helplessly by the environment. Instead there is reciprocity between human behavior and the external conditions that influence it. This is an image of the environment as a behavioral creation that acts back on the behavior of the actor(s) who created it. To understand individual action, social learning looks to (1) cues that occur prior in time, (2) mental processes (cognitions) that mediate the cues, and (3) rewarding or punishing consequences that follow. Social learning theory also identifies feedback from consequences to cueing and thinking for future behavior. Taken together, these are the social learning *contingencies*. Figure 1, adapted from learning applications in organizational theory, shows them schematically.

INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIOR MODEL[1]

| PRIOR CUES | PERSON | ACTION | CONSEQUENCES |
|---|---|---|---|
| Physical and socio-cultural cues | Physiological and psychological mediators | Overt and covert patterns of action | Positive and negative consequences |

The most powerful contingencies of operant behavior are rewards and punishments. An increased probability exists for behavior that has been rewarded (reinforced) and a decreased probability exists for behavior that has not been reinforced (punished). Reinforcement is intensified or diminished by psychological deprivation or satiation that originate in cultural and material facts of life and that are an integral part of learning. To the extent that one possesses a great deal of something, its value as a reward is lessened, and vice versa. But value also has socially constructed ideological origins.

Prior cues.— Human actions are controlled partially through cues that suggest probable consequences—rewards or punishments—that either inhibit or encourage behavior. The point is made by the cueing effect of a red traffic signal, a reminder that not stopping may lead to an accident. This foresight stems from direct experience, learning by observing others, and symbolic information (via language). We control our own behavior by predicting the probable consequences of particular actions. Consider an illustration of the cueing effect, a poster or flyer announcing an upcoming organizational action or campaign. Based on prior social learning, the organization's allies and adversaries differ drastically in the consequences they anticipate and the actions they initiate.

Thinking and knowing.— Social learning acknowledges human cognition, the capacity for thinking (sensation, perception, and conception) and knowing (recollection

of the past, consciousness of the present, and anticipation of the future). The potential for insight and foresight is emphasized. Behavior change is viewed much differently if it is assumed that regulation is mainly through external events, or, in the alternative, partly by thinking. Because of cognition, behavior is contingent on mediated rather than direct reality. We do not "passively register" the world as it really is, but construct what we call "reality." Mental processes guide behavior: Memory, the mental encoding and storage of symbols for external events, exists as symbolic representations of the environment to direct subsequent behavior. Options for action are tested by explorations in thinking that imagine future consequences. Hypotheses are generated and, to the extent they are proven out in action, they continue to guide future behavior.

Rewarding and punishing consequences.— The lodestone for understanding and predicting what individuals do is reinforcement that follows behavior. Reinforcement can occur without awareness; however, because it has several potential functions—information, motivation, and reward—learning is more effective when contingencies are known. Reinforcement not only increases the probability that the same action will be repeated in similar circumstances, but it serves to bring the particular behavior under the influence of a matching environmental cue. The caution here is that neither the prior cue nor the rewarding consequence creates the behavior, but both increase the probability for it.

Consider as an illustration of reinforcement the mid-1960s Welfare Rights Organization member who attended a first meeting and follow-up protest at a welfare office, anticipating the rewarding prospect of immediately receiving a special grant for household goods and winter clothing. If the hoped-for benefits were won, a rewarding outcome, not only was similar action more probable in the future, but cues for such behavior were more potent.

## Self

Self-management.— The role of thinking in social learning takes the explanation beyond environmental factors. The thinking process in self-management is such that we set standards for ourselves, matched by self-rewarding or self-punishing outcomes according to the quality of our performances. We find two kinds of continuing outcomes when people are self-managing: internal (mental) self-evaluations and external (environmental) consequences.

Self-management is recognizable in "autonomous" people. The independent, differentiated person, with exceptional dedication and self-discipline, may be recalled as an outstanding example of self-management. The heroic figures of Mohandus Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., the best-known modern proponents of aggressive nonviolence, come to mind.

Self-reinforcement systems are learned by earlier selective reinforcement. We learn to judge our own behavior partly from how others react to us. Standards are conveyed by the approval and disapproval of significant others. Observing models is another route to self-management, with standards for self-reinforcement learned by observation and imitation. We adopt standards offered by exemplary models. Regardless of how it is acquired, self-managed behavior is sustained by external reinforcement because most societies reward high standards for self-reinforcement.

Self-management is accomplished not only by control of cues and consequences, but also by symbolic, cognitive contingencies. Potential outcomes are translated into mental symbols that are reinforcing. An organization leader may self-reinforce difficult or unpleasant behavior through a tangible reward, say spending extra time with family or going to a movie, or through a symbolic reward, like allowing oneself a sense of successful self-reliance for adhering to difficult but valued standards. The strength of self-management by symbolic contingencies may be enough to maintain behavior with only minimum external rewards, and to override conflicting tangible reinforcers.

In addition to self-management by control of reinforcers, the same result may be realized by manipulating prior cues in the environment. Using an organizational example, a collective decision to outlaw alcohol at certain activities eliminates an important cue for inappropriate behavior.

Self and personality.— While risking the confusion of seeing pictures within pictures, there is an unavoidable question: What is the "self" in self-management? The self in social learning theory is understood as a constellation of interrelated behaviors. It is an individual's repertoire of learned actions—a history of social learning—to survive and thrive in a changing social environment. Personality characteristics or, more precisely, behaviors that are characteristic to a person, are linked to complex patterns of cues, cognitions, consequences, deprivation and satiation. Although it is often thought that behavior is determined by personality, the personality characteristics themselves, while enduring, are learned. We acquire complex repertoires of behavior, one leading into another, with their relative permanence creating the mistaken impression of internal psychodynamic causation.

Counter-control.— Notwithstanding the importance of environment in forming the self, there is—to repeat—a reciprocal relationship between behavior and the contingencies that control it, which arises from thinking and the capacity for self-management. It is through this reciprocal relationship that counter-control is understood. Experimental studies demonstrate, as practice does, that hostile and aggressive actions bring about like responses in others, counter-offensives.

Counter-control is possible because of mutuality in relationships, a form of exchange, giving participants in social interactions some power over each other. The principle holds even between rich and poor. Although the wealthy may withhold resources, people with low incomes have the leverage of nonviolent direct action—protest, strike, and resistance—and physical force.

Aggressive attempts to control people usually result in strong emotional responses, such as fear, anxiety, rage, and depression. Counter-control has been labeled the "screw you" phenomenon. It is identified with lack of choices, heavy coercion or manipulation, and being exposed to models that are themselves unresponsive to rewards and punishments. It may also be that counter-controlling behavior is self-reinforcing because of the autonomy it signifies.

# Modeling

Most new behavior is learned by observation of models. This is especially true of complex behavior in natural settings. New patterns are learned in large segments, not piecemeal. Learning that occurs through direct experience, then, can almost always be

achieved indirectly by observation of others' behavior and its consequences. This process is identified as modeling, observational learning, imitation, copying, identification, and so on. It may be overt, as commonly understood, or covert. In the latter, learning takes place by imagining modeling situations, without using actual external models. In either case, the effects of modeling are from the actions of the learning contingencies already described.

Competent models reduce the risk of learning new behavior because, usually, actions guided by following good examples are more likely to be successful. This type of learning is not exclusively imitative but can result in innovative behavior when opportunities exist to observe diverse models.

Effective observational learning relies on four practice keys: attention to modeled behavior, representation of the behavior to be learned in verbal or image form for long-term retention, physical ability to perform the desired behavior, and reinforcement for overt performance. The last point is important because there is a break between observational learning and actual performance. Although new behavior can be acquired by observation of a model, *performance* of what has been learned may not take place without reinforcing incentives. Observation without performance leads to acquisition of the modeled behavior in cognitive, representational forms (images or language symbols). Cues are encoded into memory and serve as mediators for later responses.

People are selective in the behavior they reproduce, an indication that imitation is as much due to imagined utility as it is to immediate reinforcement. Not all models are copied, only those whose behavior is judged to have some usefulness, based on past social learning. Observers learn to appraise models on situational cues, such as socio-economic indicators, age, sex, etc.

Beyond acquisition of new behavior, exposure to models may inhibit or disinhibit previously learned responses. Inhibitions are strengthened or weakened by vicarious experience of a model's rewards and punishments. Vicarious punishment diminishes the probability for similar behavior, even when the punishment is self-administered by the model. In vicarious positive reinforcement, seeing modeled behavior that is ordinarily disapproved go unpunished has the same motivating influence as observing rewards for that behavior.

While modeling is frequently inadvertent, and thus often inimical to practice objectives, its conscious use by practitioners is essential in organizing. For example, modeling in one project was used to upgrade problem solving in meetings of a board of directors. The meetings had been fragmented, chaotic, and generally unproductive. The remedy was to teach board members to identify and isolate problems, specify and evaluate alternative solutions, make decisions, and plan follow-up actions. The successful training used behavioral modeling, plus role-playing and systematic reinforcement.

The probability for successful modeling is enhanced by the following procedural steps: specific identification of the desired behavioral outcome, selection of an appropriate model, determination that the "learner" has the necessary skills and resources to perform the desired behavior, creation of a favorable learning environment, modeling the desired behavior and its consequences, giving rewards for progress in learning, and strengthening new behavior by scheduling future reinforcers.[2]

## Footnotes

[1] Adapted from Fred Luthans, *Organizational Behavior* (2d ed.), (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977), p. 104.

[2] Fred Luhans and Robert Kreitner, *Organizational Behavior Modification* (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1975), pp. 140-41.