Social Learning Theory & Mass Communication

Kevin O’Rorke

Albert Bandura was born in 1925 in the province of Alberta, Canada. He grew up in a very small town; his high school only had 20 students. Bandura attended the University of British Columbia as an undergraduate and the University of Iowa as a graduate student in psychology. At Iowa he studied with Robert Sears, one of the pioneers in social learning theory. In 1953 Bandura joined the faculty at Stanford where he continues to work. Bandura has established a high reputation in psychology and in 1974 he served as president of the American Psychological Association. According to many researchers, his students consider him a modern generalist, a man whose knowledge spans across many fields in the social sciences.

The pioneering learning and motivation theorists usually developed their concepts by experimenting with animals in artificial settings. They observed how animals solved puzzle boxes or mazes and learned to press levers. Bandura noticed one omission in these experiments; they were not social. There were no other animals present. Behaviorists then showed that the same principles can be applied humans in social contexts. Skinner noted that “just as rats learn to press levers to get food, people learn to interact with others to obtain social rewards”. However, some researchers have questioned whether this analogy is really perfect. Bandura argues that in social situations we learn a great deal through imitation. In behaviorist theory, learning often appears to be a gradual process in which organisms must act to learn based on their environment. The repetition of that behavior is then based on the type of reinforcement one receives (positive vs. negative). Bandura however, argues that in social situations people often learn much more rapidly simply by observing the behaviors of others. Humans appear to acquire large segments of new behaviors all at once, through observation alone.

Social learning theory is a combination of behavioral and cognitive theories. Bandura suggests that both internal and external factors are equally important. The basic equation set forth is: Personal factors, such as beliefs, expectations, attitudes and knowledge (cognitive) plus environmental factors, such as resources, consequences of actions, physical setting (behavioral) plus behaviors, such as individual actions, choices, and verbal statements influence learning and motivation.

One of the more important concepts with social learning theory is observational learning. The power of observational learning is well documented in the literature. No-trial learning is when a human acquires new behavior all at once, entirely through observation. In this type, you do not need to go through the process of trial and error learning with differential reinforcement for each small response. When this new behavior is acquired through observation alone, the learning appears to be cognitive. Thus Bandura, unlike Skinner, believes that that learning must include internal cognitive variables (Crain 1992). Observation also teaches us the probable consequences of new behavior; we notice what happens when others try it. Bandura calls this process vicarious reinforcement. Vicarious reinforcement is also is also a cognitive process; we formulate expectations about the outcomes of our own behavior without any direct action on our part (Crain 1992).

Symbolic models are another type of model that we can learn from. These are non-live models such as those we see on television or read about in books. Other forms of symbolic models include verbal instruction as when an instructor describes for us the actions for driving a car. In this case the teacher’s verbal descriptions combined with demonstration, usually teaches us most of what we need to know. This is fortunate, for if we had to learn to drive exclusively from consequences of our own actions, few of would survive the driving process (Bandura 1962).

As described by Bandura, there are four components of observational learning. To successfully imitate a model we must 1) attend to the model, 2) have some way of retaining what we have seen, 3) have the necessary motor skills to reproduce the behavior. If these conditions are met, we probably know how to imitate the model. Still, one may choose not to. Our actual performances are controlled by, 4) reinforcement contingencies, many of which are vicarious. These four components are not totally separate. Reinforcement processes, in particular, influence what we attend to. As Bandura noted “we often attend to powerful, competent, prestigious models because we have found that imitating them, rather than inferior models, leads to more positive consequences.”

The focus of this paper is on the social cognitive theory in relation to mass communication. Because of the influential role the mass media plays in today’s society, understanding the mechanisms through which symbolic communication influences human behavior is of great importance. Social learning theorists have shown that behavior is influenced not only by personal or live models but also by those presented in the mass media. Television and film models, in particular, seem to exert a powerful impact, and one major implication is that television is shaping humans motivation and behavior on a daily basis. Social learning theorists have been especially concerned
with televised violence and use of alcohol and its affect on children. Research has shown that, in fact, it can increase children’s aggressiveness and tendency to consume alcohol within their lifetime. Although these findings are complex, it does raise concerns about how much television our youth attends to and what exactly is the content of the programs that they are viewing, including advertisements.

The kinds of models presented in the mass media have been of concern to those seeking social change, such as minorities and women’s groups. These groups have pointed out that movies, television programs, and print media (magazines and books) have typically depicted women and people of color in stereotyped roles and may have affected their general sense of self efficacy. Recently, many organizations have been campaigning to the mass media to offer new kinds of accurate models such as minorities and women as educated, successful professionals. Social learning theorists would agree that this is an advantageous strategy to employ in hope that social change would take place.

In today’s society, media has become a powerful influence on our lives. As children enter adolescence, print and electronic media help them define who they are and what they want to become. By the time children reach middle school, they have spent tens of thousands of hours watching television, movies, and videos; listening to the radio, CDs and cassettes; reading magazines, newspapers, and books; playing video and computer games and surfing the Internet. Advertisers of alcohol use the power and influence of media to convey a positive message for their products. Alcohol advertisements glamorize drinking and play directly into the needs of teen-agers by promising fun, popularity, relaxation and escape. In 1994, the alcohol industry spent about $1 billion in alcohol advertising, including $708.7 million spent by beer marketers. The entire budget for the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism in 1993 was $176 million (American Academy of Pediatrics).

The following statistics were presented on the home page of the American Academy of Pediatrics: Someone dies in an alcohol-related car crash every 31 minutes. Youth who drink are 7.5 times more likely to use other illicit drugs and 50 times more likely to use cocaine. More than 43% of teen-agers who began drinking before age 14 later became alcoholics. Alcohol-related car crashes are the leading cause of death among teen-agers ages 15 to 24. Alcohol abuse by adults contributes to as much as 70% of child abuse cases.

An exposure study of Anheuser-Busch’s 1995 frog campaign on children 9 to 11 years of age found that 95% of the children recognized Tony the Tiger while 81% recognized the beer frogs. Overall, 73% of the sample remembered the slogan “Bud-weis-er” and 81% knew the frogs sold beer. Boys were more likely than girls to remember the product. More children recalled the Budweiser slogan than the slogans for commercials and characters shown during children’s programs (Alcohol Policy Network).

What gives significance to vicarious influence is that observers can acquire lasting attitudes, emotional reactions, and behavioral propensities toward persons, places or things that have been associated with modeled emotional experiences. They learn to fear the things that frightened models, to dislike what repulsed them and to like what gratified them (Bandura, 1986). At times, television often represents social realities in human nature, social relations, and day to day life of human interactions. The potential danger of heavy consumption of television is the exposure to this symbolic world may make the televised images appear to the authentic state of human affairs. This outcome can be detrimental to those individuals that have no other models that they can observe. In the absence of a parent, guardian or peer that is able to explain reality from fiction, the child may be more inclined to attend and reproduce the modeled behavior seen on television.

The fashion and taste industries rely heavily on the social prompting power of modeling. Because the potency of vicarious influences can be enhanced by showing modeled acts bringing rewards, vicarious outcomes figure prominently in advertising campaigns. Thus, drinking a certain brand of wine or using a particular shampoo wins the loving admiration of beautiful people, enhances job performance, masculinizes self-conception, and actualizes individualism (Bandura 2002).

Bandura and other researchers have concluded that the mass media not only creates personal attributes but also can alter pre-existing ones based on exposure. Exposure plays a large role in the process of social learning theory. The following are statistics that were generated by the Alcohol Policy Network- Alcohol appears in 2/3s of all programs, 8.1 drinking references are made per hour in programs and music videos, over 1.5 alcohol advertisements appear each hour during sports programs (mostly beer), 1 in 4 music videos has the lead performer smoking and drinking. By bombarding viewers with enticing scenes of alcohol use, music videos and other television programming may lure teens to take their first drink, three Stanford researchers have concluded. Their survey of more than 1,500 ninth-graders at six San Jose high schools suggests that the more TV and music videos teens watch, the greater the odds they will start drinking during the next 18 months. Specifically, every extra hour of music videos per week brought a 31 percent increase in the average risk of starting to drink during the next 18 months. Every extra hour of general TV-watching increased the average risk by 9 percent, said Tom Robinson, MD, assistant professor of pediatrics and of medicine.

Another important aspect of social learning theory in relation to mass media is the flow of information through social networks.
As noted before, the exposure that one experiences through television is often a contributing factor toward behavior, but even humans that do not watch television or listen to radio are affected by the mass media. People are intertwined in networks of relationships that include co-workers, friendships, classmates, teammates, intimate relationships and family members. Because these social networks often overlap, people are often directed by the media to designate what is important to discuss and what the current public agenda may be during a given time period. Therefore, the individual that does not watch television is often involved in social interaction that is based on communication with television viewers and other media consumers. This communication can lead to the same behavior being displayed by the consumer as well as the non-consumer.

This abstract modeling that youth can reproduce through observation can provide us valuable information and direction while educating our youth. Bandura’s work should do a good deal to increase our awareness of the importance of models in child-rearing and education. Although most parents and teachers are already somewhat aware of the fact that they teach by example, they probably have also overlooked how important influential modeling can become. A case in point is physical punishment. Many parents attempt to prevent their children from fighting by spanking them when they fight. By spanking, the parents are inadvertently providing a good demonstration of how to control others physically. Similarly, social learning theorists have taught us that whenever we find that we are unable to rid a child of some distressing bit of behavior, we might ask whether we have been inadvertently modeling the behavior ourselves (Schunk, 1996).

Social learning theory has generated much research. Evidence shows that social learning theory and one’s sense of self efficacy predicts such diverse outcomes as alcohol abuse, smoking cessation, pain tolerance, athletic performance, career choices, assertiveness, coping with feared events, recovery from medical procedures and sales performance. These studies have employed diverse settings, subjects, measures, treatments, tasks and time spans. The generality of social learning theory will be extended in future research. Hopefully, this research will continue in social cognitive tradition and offer additional insights regarding the relationship of learning theories and mass media technology.

References


