

Running Head: SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY

An Exploration of Social Learning in Children as Indicated by Non-
participant Observation

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Abstract

This paper will discuss aspects of Social Learning in children as illustrated by a non-participant observation exercise. This exercise was carried out with children in three different age groups by the author and members of her learning team, and sought to focus on examples of modelling. This paper will provide an analytic critique of social learning theory as it applies to children based on the observations made.

Social Learning Theory in Children

Social Learning Theory (SLT) emphasises learning that occurs within a social context, through such activities as observation, imitation, and modelling (Ormrod, 1999). According to its key proponent, Albert Bandura, much of human behaviour is learned observationally through modelling, and there is ongoing reciprocal interaction between cognitive, behavioural, and environmental influences as fundamental to the learning process (Bandura, 1977).

SLT is viewed as a theory that bridges cognitive and behavioural conceptualisations of learning and development. The central processes underlying observational learning are: attention (to the model), retention and motor reproduction (of modelled behaviour), and motivational factors associated with the behaviour. SLT has been applied in various ways, including studies of aggression (Tapper & Boulton, 2005), substance abuse prevention in pre-schoolers (Hahn & Papazian, 1987), and improving academic attitudes (Demirbas & Yagbasan, 2006).

Of interest to this writer, are the observable manifestations of social learning. How do children, for example, illustrate the principles of this theory in their daily interactions with each other? Does SLT apply differently to children of different age groups? Are there limitations in the application of this theory to children and/or in the approach used to study them? This paper will seek to critically discuss key principles of the Social Learning

Theory as it relates to children, and as demonstrated through a non-participant observation exercise. The writer will first outline the procedure involved in the observation exercise, and then relate the findings to the central principles of the Social Learning Theory.

Three members of a learning team conducted the observational exercise in three parts. Each team member observed children from one of three age groups (early childhood, middle childhood, and adolescence) for approximately one hour. Observations were listed on a common worksheet (See Appendix 1.0). The early childhood group, which will represent the focus of this paper, was observed playing in a neighbourhood cul-de-sac. The ages of the children ranged from two to five years old. The middle childhood children were between the ages of six and twelve years, and were observed at a childcare facility. The adolescents were observed at a Summer camp. The SLT principles observed will now be discussed.

In the early childhood group of children, there was initially considerable parallel play. Different children were engaged in individual play activities including kicking a ball, riding bicycles, and playing with a dog. However, after a few minutes they started to interact. Modelling was evident in several scenarios, particularly between two girls, ages three and four years.

At one point, the younger child was riding her bicycle. She then started to observe the four-year-old who was walking a dog. According to SLT theorists, attending is the first step in observational

learning. Shortly afterwards, she approached the older child and was allowed to walk the dog as the older child had done. This demonstrates other elements of observational learning: retention, in remembering how the older child had walked the dog, and motor reproduction, in replicating what she had observed. Motivational factors are also important in observational learning but could only be speculated about from this exercise.

On another occasion, the older child placed her hand close to the dog's mouth, pretended to be bitten, drew it away quickly, and laughed. The three-year-old repeated the sequence. This imitative behaviour could be considered a type of observational learning of pretence and joking. The triadic interaction put forward by SLT theorists between person, behaviour, and environment is evident in these exchanges. Changes in behaviour were indicated in the three-year-old person due to interactions with her social environment, which consisted of her four-year-old playmate. In this case, the playmate was a live model, rather than a symbolic model that could be observed in a television programme or on videotape. The influence of such symbolic models has been demonstrated empirically. For example, higher levels of television viewing have been associated with earlier onset of smoking (Gutschoven & Van den Bulck, 2005).

Of interest, is the observation that the children in the early childhood group communicated extensively through gestures and facial expressions. There was a lot of pointing, for example, hand-holding, and grabbing. Their speech was intermittent and disjointed. The

observations carried out by team members with older children revealed that their participants used speech more extensively in their interactions with each other. This could be considered an illustration of the concept of self-efficacy, which purports that an individual is more likely to engage in certain behaviours when they believe that they are capable of executing them successfully. It is conceivable that children use speech to communicate more as their proficiency increases with age. These young children may have felt more confident communicating with gestures and facial expressions than with words. Another illustration of self-efficacy is the demarcation of activities between younger and older children. The younger children opted not to play football with the older ones but instead focused on riding their bicycles, and playing with the dog. This choice may have also been influenced by their lack of ability to replicate the complex behaviours associated with the football game. There also appeared to be evidence of modelling in the behaviour of the older children. They seemed to take on the "adult" role in running to the aid of the three-year-old when she fell off her bike, comforting her, giving her instructions about where and how to ride, and in some cases, holding her bicycle as an adult would to ensure that she maintained stability. It is likely that this evidence of pro-social behaviour reflects modelling of behaviours that they observed elsewhere. SLT theorists are very interested in the role of social learning in moral behaviours, and self-regulation, which focuses on an individual's beliefs about appropriate or inappropriate

behaviours, and how they translate into action.

Other general observations were that the children were all of African-Caribbean descent, were from roughly the same upper middle class socio-economic bracket, well-kempt, dressed appropriately for play and for the weather, and interacted amicably throughout the observational period. Both sexes were represented in the group, with marginally more males than females.

The observational exercise highlighted a number of behaviours that could be considered evidence for social learning in young children. This was most obvious in the two young girls, three and four years old. The younger child observed and imitated several of the behaviours of the older child. SLT theorists have also observed that modelling is more likely to occur with a model that is similar to the observer. These two children were closest in age and were both female. Other elements of social learning were seen in the caring behaviours of older children towards younger ones, and the possibly efficacy-linked choices of activities made by younger and older children.

There are several issues to be considered, however. The observational exercise was conducted for a limited time with a small sample, and therefore cannot form the basis of generalisable conclusions regarding the children's behaviours and social learning. Second, the presence of the observer may have impacted on the behaviours displayed. For example, there were no altercations, which

may have occurred in the absence of an adult. Third, the exercise could only draw conclusions about behaviourally demonstrated aspects of social learning. Only inferences could be drawn about the cognitive aspects of social learning such as cognitive organization, symbolic rehearsal, and affective valence associated with observed behaviours. Indeed, SLT theorists state that not all learning is evidenced by observable behaviour change. Social learning is also not the only way that children learn.

The exercise was useful, however, in providing some evidence of how social learning can manifest itself in children. It suggests that social learning is a reality, and that its applications in various arenas throughout the lifespan can yield powerful positive and negative effects on behaviour.

References

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Lifespan Development & Learning
CHILD OBSERVATION SHEET (TEAM A)

Observer: Makesha Evans

Date: August 5, 2006

Ages of Children: 3 – 5 years

Location: Neighbourhood cul-de-sac

Period of observation: 1 hour 2 hours

CATEGOR Y	OBSERVATIONS
Behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Several activities were being conducted simultaneously: playing with dog, playing with ball, cycling. - Older children were giving directives to the younger children, and ran to the aid of one when she fell off her bicycle. - Older children were treated as reference points: younger children asked them questions about what they were doing. - There was some competition; for example, two children wanted to hold the dog's leash. These two children (3 and 4 years old) held hands and went off to play inside towards the end of the observation. - Occasionally, the 3 year old was showing some modelling of the older child's behaviour in terms of choice of activity. She stopped riding her bicycle to play with the dog alongside the 4 year old.
Clothing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Children were dressed in shorts, t-shirts, and slippers - Clothing was appropriate for the Summer - Children appeared well cared-for; clothes were in good condition and relatively clean

Speech	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Somewhat unclear and disjointed. However, children seemed to understand each other.
Mannerisms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A lot of gestures and overt behavioural responses; these were used instead of talking. - For example, one child placed a reassuring hand on another child's shoulder when she fell off her bike; there was hand-holding, shrugging, and a lot of pointing.

Analysis/Discussion points based on Social Learning Theory

(include sources of modelling: media, peers, role models, etc.)

Towards the beginning of the observation, a lot of parallel play was observed. There was a group of children, each doing his/her own thing. However, as they began to interact, more interaction was seen, although the interactive groups were almost always dyads. Two children played together with the dog. Two children were riding their bicycles together and talking about which direction to take. Two children identified a toy and went off to play with it together. Modelling was seen with the older children. They appeared to assume the role of the adults in the situation. They were quick to respond when one child fell off her bicycle, sought to comfort her, and were giving her instructions about how and where to ride. The younger children seemed to assume the role of "child" to an extent, and listened to the instructions of the older children. With two of the children (3 and 4 years old), modelling was evident in that the younger of the two started mimicking the older. For example, when they were playing together with the dog, the older pretended that the dog had bitten her, pulled her hand away and laughed. The younger child did the same thing.