**Critical Analysis of Social Cognition and Social Learning Theory**

**Amanda Studebaker**

**Social Psychology**

**March 7, 2012**

**Macon State College**

**Dr. Myra Davis**

**Information as a Commodity**

In the 1960’s Albert Bandura, hailed as one of the most influential psychologists of all time, developed his “Social Learning Theory” explaining that positive and negative reinforcement tactics fail to explain all facets of learning. His findings show that modeling and reinforcement, the main components of social learning theory, contribute to bridging the gap between various aspects of behavioral and cognitive theories of learning.

Modeling, the core of social learning theory, refers to the process by which a person repeats behaviors observed in another individual or group. Bandura also refers to this type of learning as “observational learning”. His famous Bobo doll study exemplified the concept of modeling behavior. After watching videos of someone punching the Bobo doll, children tended to imitate many of the actions the viewed when placed in a room with a Bobo doll among the various toys they could play with. As Bandura wrote, “Most of the injurious consequences of major social concern are caused remotely, circuitously, and impersonally through social practices

judged aggressive by the victims but not by those who benefit from them” (Bandura, 1977). In other words, negative results occur when one perceives a particular behavior of another as desirable or accepted behavior, thus modeling the behavior.

The second component of Bandura’s social learning theory pertains to both positive and negative reinforcement. Defined as any “action or process that strengthens a behavior” (Duff, 2012), reinforcement either continues or ends a behavior. Positive reinforcement aims to increase the likelihood of desirable behaviors. This occurs frequently when parents reward their children with money for good grades on their report cards. Conversely, negative reinforcement works to decrease the likelihood of undesirable behavior. A day at the beach usually involves sunscreen to avoid getting burned. In this example, the sunburn is the negative reinforcement because sunburn is painful. The behavior of applying sunscreen before going in the sun is negatively reinforced by the burn that results without it.

**The Value of the Information**

In a 2009 study about the evolution of culture, the researchers formed seventy “microsocieties” (Caldwell & Millen, 2009) with their 700 participants. Each group of ten was tasked with building a paper airplane that would fly as far as possible. Participants were told that their monetary reward would improve to reflect their performance on the task. One person would begin with five minutes to read the instructions and then five minutes to build the airplane. Once they flew their plane, and the next person began the sequence, the previous person returned to the group for another five minutes to teach them the task.

Results of this study showed a significant improvement along the line, as hypothesized by the researchers. Not only was score ten better than score one, but score ten was better than score nine, which was better than eight, and so on. Social learning occurred in this instance as various methods and enhancements made their way down the line, with each person adding their own in addition to the information they received from the previous person (Caldwell & Millen, 2009).

Social learning occurs in all possible situations, often times without any conscious perception of the behavior. Even negative situations, such as drug and alcohol use, violence, and discrimination, can have significant influence on one’s behaviors. Even if the person decides they wish to avoid or eliminate an undesirable behavior, these decisions are still based on the previous behaviors and perceptions of others.

**Information as a Tool or Weapon**

While much social learning can be considered a tool to pass on skills and information, much can also be used as a weapon with various intents and purposes. As a tool, social learning improves grades, facilitates cooperation between friends, and creates the acceptable norms of a society. As a weapon, social learning assists with the perpetuation of stereotypes, discrimination, and bigotry. A good example of this is a child that learns racism from his father’s own racist tendencies, whether they be physical action or verbal expression of ideas, beliefs, and perceptions.

Three areas rife with negative social learning are politics, mass media, and advertising. Advertising in particular attempts to sway opinion by over-sensationalizing their product in an attempt to generate sakes of their product. The perfect example if negative social learning intended to sway opinion is the latest Dr. Pepper commercial for their new product “Dr. Pepper Ten”. The commercial endeavors to market a diet soda to men. The immediate intent of the advertisement is to use humor in order for their product to be more appealing to a target population traditionally underrepresented in diet products. The unfortunate consequence of the commercial is that it seems to justify discrimination, in particular Th[e closing line of the commercial states th](file:///C:\Users\Amanda\Documents\School\Social%20Psychology\e%20closing%20line%20of%20the%20commercial%20states%20th)e soda is “not for women” (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3iuG1OpnHP8>).

This is particularly harmful for children, who are generally incapable of forming their own opinions without being taught. They instead look to their environment and in particular the people around them to instill in them the tools to survive in the world. The message this commercial provides children is highly dependent on the sex of that child. Little boys receive the same information that has been pushed on boys since the beginning of time; that women are subordinate and it is ok for men to separate themselves from women.

**Biases Affecting Information**

The availability bias refers to the tendency to accept readily available, easy to find information while ignoring any information that one must expend more energy and effort to find. Information on the implications of social learning theory is indeed readily available, but specific information is mostly only available to those that have knowledge of Albert Bandura or specific terms and concepts they wish to explore. This means that most social learning information occurs subconsciously on a regular basis, however most people never hear the term for the behavior they are exhibiting. Not having that information means that a full understanding of social learning never occurs for most people. It is possible that exposure to social learning theory could benefit society greatly, as conscious acknowledgement of a negative behavior remains the only way to change it.

Aesthetics and image presented by businesses in particular appear regularly on websites, advertisements, and commercials, all with the intent to persuade the consumer to buy and/or use their product or service. This creates what is referred to as “packaging bias”. Many vacation oriented companies use images of romance, exotic locations, and activities as well as bright vivid colors, special discounts, and plenty of links to informational pages on their websites. Sandals resorts in the Caribbean exemplify the use of this strategy (<http://www.sandals.com/>). Images of crystal clear blue-green water, snorkeling, and quality time with a loved one on the beach are but a few of the ways Sandals persuades consumers to vacation at their resorts. Consumers see attractive people enjoying wonderful vacations in breathtakingly beautiful exotic locations. These people are having fun and consumers wish to have fun as well.

**Conclusion**

Research on social learning theory has provided a great deal of evidence that it is a valid concept that deserves greater focus. Aggression occurred when children watched aggression. Scores on the distances of paper airplane launches improved reinforced by the behavior modeled and taught by successive members of the group. Businesses, politicians, and the mass media all use social learning tactics to persuade consumers.

The modern world continues to become increasingly complicated resulting from human innovation and technology. For this reason, it is imperative to acknowledge that humans are social creatures. That acknowledgement coupled with the beneficial aspects of social learning theory remains the only predictor of evolutionary fitness leading to the continuation of a species.