Social Cognitive Theory

Samuel J. Smith
SOCIAL COGNITIVE LEARNING THEORY

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“I was in a meeting today, and somebody said, ‘You know, we’re not hired to be role models.’ When, in fact, I think we are.” Those words were spoken by Justin Tucker, one of our Liberty University graduates. He was sharing this in the context of a discussion about one of the School of Education dispositions—integrity. How do we teach dispositions, such as integrity? And, for that matter, how do we teach anything, whether knowledge, skills, or dispositions?

Behaviorist and Constructivist Models of Learning

B. F. Skinner, the father of operant conditioning believed that teaching and learning occur only when a desirable behavior is reinforced through stimulus-response or when an undesirable behavior is extinguished or punished. All of us experience Skinner’s behaviorist ideas one way or another. As teachers, we often use his behavior modification techniques with students. Employers, marketers, and law enforcement use behaviorism with us to get us to work harder, buy products, and obey the law. But is that it? Is behaviorism the final word on the theory of teaching and learning?

Of course it’s not. On the other end of the spectrum is Jean Piaget’s constructivist theory of cognitive development, which focuses on internal personal processes rather than external environmental factors. The argument between Piaget and Skinner basically boils down to this: “What has the most influence in the person you become? Is it an internal process of you constructing who you are and your own reality? Or is it up to your environment and what’s going on around you that makes you who you are?” It’s the perennial nature versus nurture argument. But, in this presentation, we’re not going to go as far as Piaget, who is on the opposite end of the continuum from Skinner. We’re just going to take a few steps away from Skinner’s
behaviorism to look at another theory that also values the environment—yet in a very different way.

**Albert Bandura’s Social Learning Theory**

You may not be as familiar with the name Albert Bandura as you are with B. F. Skinner, but I bet you’re familiar with the concepts of modeling and self-efficacy. These concepts are central to Bandura’s social learning theory—also known as social cognitive theory. You see, Bandura was in the same behaviorist camp as Skinner, valuing the environment as the strongest influence on the people we become and on the knowledge, skills, and dispositions we learn. But he came to reject the idea that individuals must personally experience positive or negative reinforcement through direct stimulus-response in order to learn. He believed other factors were at play—one of those being vicarious reinforcement.

**Modeling, Vicarious Reinforcement, and Self-efficacy**

**Learning to overcome phobias:** Here’s an example: If you wanted to learn to overcome a fear of heights, Skinner’s behaviorism requires you to take incremental steps and to be reinforced as you performed each step. You might climb a ladder today and be rewarded. Tomorrow, you could climb a tree and be reinforced again. Over time, behaviorist theory holds that you would eventually overcome your fear of heights and might be able to climb Sharp Top (which is one of the mountain peaks not too far from Liberty’s campus).

In Bandura’s mind, using social learning theory, he believed that you could learn to overcome a phobia without direct reinforcement personally to you. Through vicarious reinforcement, you could watch someone else—a model—be successful at overcoming a phobia. The vicarious reinforcement might not even be something tangible, like money, candy, or food. It could be the actual success of climbing Sharp Top, recognition from other people, or the
gratification that’s displayed in the person’s expressions of confidence after the task is completed. As you observe this model overcoming her fear of heights, you begin experiencing a sense of self-efficacy. “If she can do it, I can do it!” Or maybe you begin with, “Well, it wouldn’t hurt if I at least took a first step, just to see what happens.” You weren’t reinforced yourself, yet you learned something because someone else modeled it for you.

Bandura found that modeling was effective, even if the model was an actor in an artificial situation and even if the learner was aware that the model was an actor. In one study, for example, the learner had a real fear of snakes. The learner was told, “We’re going to have you watch an actor pretending to have a fear of snakes. The actor will walk through a series of steps leading to a supposed victory in overcoming this fear.” So, while the learner watched through a window, the actor walked into a room where there was a snake. He pretended to be afraid of it, but over time, using self-talk, such as “I’ll just get six feet from it and see how I do. . . . Well, that wasn’t too bad. I did it! Now, I’ll get within three feet.” Eventually, the actor took incremental steps to touch the snake for just a moment, then hold it for a few seconds, and finally wrap it around his arms while petting it. When asked to give it a try, the learner mimicked the actor’s actions, words, and incremental steps until the learner, who had begun with a legitimate fear, was also holding and petting the snake. You can see through this example how powerful the role of modeling is in the learning process and how observing someone’s success can give the learner a sense of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is similar to the experience of the locomotive in the children’s book The Little Train That Could when he kept telling himself, “I think I can! I think I can!”

**Learning dispositions.** One study conducted by social learning theorists involves teaching the disposition of generosity. Students were told that they would be going on a field
trip to a bowling alley. Beforehand, they were to watch a video that would teach them bowling tips and how to keep score. A control group watched a video that included a donation jar on the scoring table with a sign that read, “When you make a strike, give a quarter to help needy children.” In the control group video, however, it was rare that any of the bowlers donated after making a strike. The experimental group watched a different video. In theirs, every time bowlers made a strike, they inconspicuously tossed a quarter in the jar. In neither video was there any comment made about the jar or the bowlers’ behavior toward it. The videos strictly discussed tips for bowling success and how to keep score. When students were taken to the bowling alley, those in the experimental group were more likely by far to contribute to the donation jar than those in the control group. The conclusion was that modeling generosity is highly effective in teaching others to be generous.

Relationship between model and observer. As Bandura and other social learning theorists developed their research further, they found something else that is very powerful. They discovered that the closer the model is to the learner in personal characteristics, the more likely the learner is to imitate the behavior of the model. For instance, learners were more likely to repeat behaviors displayed by a model if that model was of the same age, gender, ethnicity, nationality, or socio-economic status as the observer. Learners are also more likely to replicate a model’s behavior if there is a close relationship between the model and the learner—if they are close family or friends or if the learner holds the model in high regard. Celebrity endorsements are a good example of this. For instance, school libraries have hung posters of actors, musicians, and athletes reading books in hopes that this would encourage students to read more. This can backfire, however, if the librarian displays a big poster of the Pittsburg Steelers quarterback reading a book but the librarian doesn’t realize that most of the students at this school are
Baltimore Ravens fans who can’t tolerate the site of a Steelers uniform. The poster might actually have the opposite effect of driving them away from reading instead of drawing them to it.

**Acquisition of undesirable behaviors.** Bandura was convinced that social learning theory explained not just the acquisition of positive behaviors but that modeling and self-efficacy can also cause learners to acquire negative behaviors, such as violence and aggression. Bandura’s most famous study on childhood aggression was the Bobo Doll experiment. In this study, he showed videos to young children of a playroom and the different types of activities they would experience once they would be allowed to enter the room. No instruction was given as to how to conduct themselves, but the video did show the children what others in the room were doing. One person was being physically aggressive to a Bobo Doll—shouting insults and hitting it with a hammer. The students who saw this particular video were much more likely to imitate the same insulting words to the Bobo Doll and also to hit it with the hammer in the same way.

This experiment garnered a great deal of criticism. Many researchers believed it was unethical because it encouraged the participants to commit acts of aggression. Others thought that it was invalid because the acts were not actually aggressive since they were carried out on an inanimate object. After all, no one was actually hurt, and the children were aware that they were not hurting anyone. So, Bandura decided to try the experiment with a human clown being the recipient of the verbal insults and physical violence. Just as before, the children who saw the video with the human clown being insulted and physically attacked were more likely to carry out the same acts—even using identical words and gestures as were shown on the video.
Bandura was so concerned about the modeling of violence in movies that he testified before a United States Congressional Committee about the impact this was having on adolescents. He offered his research as evidence that the modeling of aggressive behaviors in film increased the likelihood that adolescents would replicate those behaviors. His hope was that laws would be enacted to limit the inclusion of violence in movies rated for teenage consumption. His efforts failed. Ironically, the same movie industry that mocked Bandura’s social learning theory as invalid also practices something called “product placement.” It’s the idea that, if a product is used in a movie, viewers are more likely to use that product. Many of these product placements aren’t subtle at all. For instance, what products are promoted in the Tom Hanks movie *Castaway*? Wilson volleyballs and FedEx. What candy did Elliott use to lure the extra-terrestrial in *E.T.?* Reese’s Pieces. Then there was Marty McFly’s Nike tennis shoes in *Back to the Future*, and AOL in *You’ve Got Mail*. So, while Hollywood implements Bandura’s social learning theory to convince corporations to expend millions of dollars purchasing product placements in their movies, they reject the idea that violence in their movies might increase the likelihood that adolescents would mimic that behavior. They embrace the theory when it’s to their advantage but reject it when it’s bad for business!

**A Biblical Perspective**

Let’s go back to the words of our Liberty graduate Justin Tucker: “I was in a meeting today, and somebody said, ‘You know, we’re not hired to be role models.’ When, in fact, I think we are.” I couldn’t agree more with Justin! More than once, I’ve seen celebrities, usually athletes, being interviewed after they’ve committed some type of shameful act; the interviewer would ask, “What would you say to the children who look up to you as a role model?” And often the celebrity would say, “I’m not a role model. I’d tell them not to look up to me.” It’s too
late! By the nature of their celebrity status, they are de facto role models and are teaching others by their actions. Sadly, many of them are just bad role models.

Compare this to what the Apostle Paul wrote. On one hand, he called himself the “chief of all sinners”—acknowledging his own flaws. On the other hand, he said, “Follow me as I follow Christ.” He owned the fact that—by the very nature of his being a leader—he was a role model, but he knew that Christ was the ultimate role model. You see, discipling others is social learning theory in action.

Hebrews chapter 12 begins with “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses . . .” Who are the people in this “cloud of witnesses”? The previous chapter listed many people of faith: Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Rahab, Samson, David, Samuel—all imperfect people. Yet, they were held up as models of faith for us to follow.

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart” (Hebrews 12:1-3, New International Version). This is an excellent description of self-efficacy. But self-efficacy doesn’t actually come from ourselves. It ultimately comes from the greatest model of all, Jesus Christ.

In closing, think about how you can use social learning theory to maximize instructional impact in the classroom, in your family, and in your church. How can you increase students’ self-efficacy by providing them models of success?

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