

# **OBSERVATIONAL LEARNING**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Observational learning, also called social learning theory, takes place when an observer's behaviour changes after viewing the behaviour of a model along the lines of the model's behaviour. Positive or negative consequences can affect the observer's behaviour - called vicarious reinforcement or vicarious punishment- of a model's behaviour. The psychologist and eminent behaviourist Albert Bandura, is the main proponent of this theory.

## **MODULE 1 CHILDREN IMITATING THEIR ELDERS 00.00-02.01**

How many of us, as we were growing up, were called copycats? In very simple terms, a copycat is someone who copies, or to put a normative angle to it, imitates, someone else by way of the words spoken or the behaviour observed. Take for instance the imitation of a younger sister who wishes to emulate the fashion styles of an elder sister – the wearing of bangles or some other such trinket by the elder is usually copied by the younger sibling – in short, the younger is copying the fashion styles of the elder. This can happen among peers as well. For instance, a girl starts wearing a particular hairstyle to the classroom, say ponytails – her friend also adopts the same hairstyle the next day – this could also be another simple example of someone copying someone else. Children have been known to imitate their teachers in school at home and outside the periphery of the classroom – the way they dress, the way they speak, their behaviour in general. Closer to home, perhaps the child imitates the way the parents behave – taking a shopping bag and pretending to go shopping. Even occupational roles are imitated by children – imitating a pilot flying an aircraft, a bus conductor asking for “tickets” or even using something round as a steering wheel to imitate the bus driver. These are all simple examples of children copying the actions, the styles, the words and the behaviours of others with whom they come into contact with and whom they have a chance to observe. Children try to imitate their elders. They do this even while playing games among themselves, imitating certain roles/occupations – simple games such as ‘teacher-teacher’, ‘mummy-daddy’, ‘robber-policemen’, ‘doctor-patient’ – children were imitating their elders. All this can be ascribed to the theory of observational learning.

## **MODULE 2 OBSERVATIONAL LEARNING 02.02-02.52**

What is observational learning? Observational learning is basically the learning achieved by watching, copying, or imitating the actions of another or noting the consequences of those actions. For instance, there are cases where young boys use the razors of their respective fathers and use the same to imitate the act of shaving – all because they have seen their fathers do the same. There are so many young girls who take and use their respective mothers' lipstick tubes and paint their lips. Again, there are so many young girls who take a long piece of cloth and tie the same to their hair so as to have the

equivalent of a plait. Although the examples given may seem too simplistic, in a sense, all of us are copycats.

### **MODULE 3 THE THEORY OF OBSERVATIONAL LEARNING 02.53-05.37**

Observational learning is also known as social learning. It is important to understand why it is known as such. A family is the basic social group into which a child is born. A child doesn't know how to take care of itself – the child learns the language used by the family, it learns how to talk, how to smile – and so one finds that the child is actually copying the actions, the gestures, the postures, the sounds of its father and mother, and of course, the people around the child. From this it can be inferred that the learning that takes place in a social setting is known as social learning. Observational learning is also known by other names – it is also known as modeling or vicarious learning. For example, children in a classroom learn by observing the behaviour of the teacher towards one of their own. Suppose the teacher praises one of the children in the room because the child has performed well in an exam and actually concretizes the praise by rewarding the child (stimulating the verbal acknowledgement with something more substantial – say a chocolate bar), then most of the other children who are made privy to this behaviour will also try to emulate their classmates success in future situations – in this case, an examination or a class test. The positive feedback accorded to the successful classmate in a way stimulates the others to follow suit – it encourages the others to imitate the success of the one rewarded. This can be true the other way round as well. Supposing one of the children scores poorly in a test and is punished by the teacher by being sent out of the classroom – this negative feedback of the student's performance will be observed by the others who learn that it will not do to score poorly in the next test as this will lead to a situation that is undesirable to say the least. Both examples highlight the way in which one learns vicariously – leaning based on observations and observing others – one observes the consequences of an action and learns lessons about the same. One is said to be observing the consequences of one's model's action(s), in the case of the aforementioned examples, by observing the actions of the teacher and the pupil in the classroom. In this way, observational learning can also be called vicarious learning. Observational learning is also known as learning through imitation. We've all imitated new and exciting fashion trends – new hairstyles, new ways of dressing up. In addition to this, we buy new clothes as well as accessories. All this is a form of imitation that is learnt through observation – observation of one's models. Young boys and girls imitating their favourite movie stars, walking like them, dressing up like them, imitating their manners, styles – the way they speak and behave. Thus, one can also learn by observing the actions of others (the models) and imitating the same.

### **MODULE 4 THE THEORY OF OBSERVATIONAL LEARNING 05.38-08.09**

As mentioned before, observational learning is also known as modeling. The main proponent of this theory is Albert Bandura (1925-present) who, in the year 1977, elaborated upon his social learning theory. In the year 1963, Bandura conducted what

gained reputation as a classic experiment in which Bandura has showed a group of nursery students a situation in which the adult models behaved very aggressively against a 'Bobo' doll – an inflated doll that bounces back whenever it is knocked down. The adult model knocked the doll down, sat down on top of it, insulted it verbally and repeatedly punched it on the nose. Another group of children were exposed to a situation where the model behaved in a quiet, non-aggressive manner with the doll. Later, both groups of youngsters were placed in the same room with several toys (the 'Bobo' dolls). Careful observation of their behaviour revealed that those who had seen the aggressive adult model often imitated the person's behaviour – they too punched the toy, sat on it, even uttered verbal comments – in short, they showed a lot of aggressive behaviour. On the contrary, the children who were not shown the aggressive model did not behave that way at all. So, Albert Bandura came up with the concept of social learning theory where he talked about modeling. As children are growing up and even much later, the act of looking at one another, seeing how to imitate, reproducing actions, gestures, postures, emotions, anxieties, tensions, fears – are all learnt through observing one another in the roles played out by various models. These models primarily of one's parents – children pick up and imitate quite a few characteristics of their parents.

## **MODULE 5 KEY FACTORS THAT AFFECT OBSERVATIONAL LEARNING**

### **08.10-13.22**

There are some very important factors that affect observational learning. The first important factor that affects observational learning is attention. What is attention? One focuses one's awareness to a particular person. One can also ask who the person is – the person should obviously be attractive to the observer's attention. This person should also perform something extremely well – from this one can infer that he or she should be successful, have status and also possess some characteristics that make others look up to him or her – one should be able to identify oneself with him or her. In effect, all of us are imitating different types of people because different types of people's behaviour are relevant to one's needs and motives. Unless that person's (that is to say, the model's) behaviour has some connection to one's needs and motives, one will not observe that person, imitate him or her or strive to model one's behaviour after him or her. Most people turn out to be like their parents not only because of a biological inheritance but also because of the environment they grew up in – observing and learning the behaviour of their parents and modeling themselves along similar lines. Children, as they grow up, display very similar behavioral as well as emotional symptoms that stem from what the parents are like. All this is because of social learning, imitation, modeling and vicarious learning.

The second important factor that affects observational learning is retention. What is retention? One looks, observes and is aware of his or her environment – the various inputs and the relevant information attained from the process of looking and observing is retained and committed to memory. If one is not exposed to something or to a situation, then one cannot have a memory of it. One retains the information of the models one is exposed to, provided the information is relevant to one. Exposure plays a very important

role for a growing child – all parents have rules for the way their children should behave and invariably bring out certain dos and don'ts that the child must adhere to. This is also known as selective exposure. The parents decide the situations and the information that is going to be accepted and retained after exposure.

The third important factor is reproduction. One remembers the actions of another, that person's gestures, the hairstyle, the way that person walks, talks and the way they dress – all this is remembered and can be reproduced. So, reproduction is reproducing the action, the gesture, the posture, the behaviour of the person observed.

The last factor that affects observational learning is motivation. What is motivation? Motivation is an urge from within to reach a goal – it is the desire to do something. Motivation entails an urge, a drive, a need – all aimed at a certain goal or sets of goals. Each of us have different goals and this is the reason why each of us imitate different sorts of people. For instance, one child could be imitating the father because he satisfies the basic needs of the child while the sibling imitates the mother. Therefore, one's level of motivation, internal drive and needs depends on the goals that one wants to reach – and the imitation and reproduction of behaviour depends on the level of motivation ascribed to the goal. For example, little children being taught dancing (or aerobic exercises) follow the instructions of the teacher and learn to do the same by observing the movements of the teacher. However, if the child is not interested in a particular style of dancing, the action will not be reproduced as desired. The child who is learning to dance must be motivated to do so. One must have some sort of motivation within oneself to reproduce the behaviour one observes and/or is exposed to.

## **MODULE 6 THE ROLE OF IDENTIFICATION IN OBSERVATIONAL LEARNING 13.23-15.47**

What is the role of identification in observational learning, that is, when one identifies with someone else's behaviour? What is identification? Why does one identify oneself with someone else – one's parents, one's favourite teacher? One simple reason is that one likes them and is therefore able to identify with them. There is a process of nurturance that these persons have given, fulfilling some of one's basic needs. These needs can be multifold and varied – the need for affection, recognition, acceptance – whatever the need is, there is a kind of positive feelings toward the persons one identifies with. One usually identifies with the persons one shares a positive relationship with. In the process, there can be the possibility of unconsciously imitating the behaviour of the person one identifies with – as mentioned earlier, these could be simple aspects such as the postures and gestures of that particular person. There is the case of a child who had been abandoned by the parents – this child had the habit of rolling her tongue under the upper lip – the same way the child's aunt did it. From this, it can be inferred that the child had unconsciously picked up the habit of the aunt by having observed her performing that gesture. This child had been looked after by the aunt ever since the child had been abandoned as a baby and through the years, imitated some of the behavioral aspects of the aunt. It would be apt to ask whether imitation is largely unconscious – this seems to be the case at the early stages of one's life. One identifies with the person who has

satisfied some of one's needs, and at the early stages, these needs are largely emotional. There is a bond that is formed with that person and one feels good because of the positive nature of that bond and relationship. There is a tendency for one to imitate whatever the significant other is doing.

### **MODULE 7 OBSERVATIONAL LEARNING AND AGGRESSION 15.48-17.49**

In today's world, children watch a lot of TV and are invariably exposed to a lot of on-screen violence. Given that observational learning takes place through seeing and imitating (as cited in the Bobo-doll example beforehand), the question can be asked whether observational learning has anything to do with the acts of violence or aggression perpetrated on something or someone – what is the relationship between observational learning and aggression? It is true that there is a link between observational learning and aggression. It is also true that many a time, we do as our models are doing and not what they are saying – we imitate what they are doing and not what they are saying. When one is looking at 15000 hours of TV viewing, positive or negative, there are chances that one is going to learn certain aggressive behaviour(s). It is true that certain aggressive behaviours are learnt – the techniques of aggressive behaviour can be learnt by viewing or being exposed to the violence on television. Unfortunately, one's inhibition is decreased by watching too much of TV violence and this can also lead to a greater readiness to act aggressively. There is also engendered an insensitivity to the problems and the pain of the victims of aggression. It is up to parents and other grownups to point out to children that what they watch on TV is not the way things really are, it is not the reality, it is not the way situations should be handled. Children must be given a choice and they must be shown another way. In this regard, experiments have also been conducted where children are made to realize that most of what they see on TV is not real – they are the graphical effects that are created to dramatize something and not the reality of things as they are in the world. We have to make our children aware that whatever they see on TV may not and need not be reality.

### **MODULE 8 OBSERVATIONAL LEARNING AND SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR 17.50-21.00**

Observational learning is the basis of the development of most human social behaviour. For instance, learning to become a pilot – many of things that are learnt is not only because of the instructions that are imparted but by the application of what is observed through the process of imitation. Another example can be that of a surgeon operation on a patient – many of the surgical techniques involved have been learnt through observation. One finds that we also learn negative and dangerous behaviours through modeling. For e.g., the models fear of snakes or even something as traumatic as child abuse is seen primarily in people who apparently learn this behaviour by observing their own parents. We look at our parents and if they display a fear of snakes, we have a greater tendency to show the same kind of behaviour. So also children who are abused in childhood have a greater tendency to abuse their own children. The same can be said about young children who are learning to smoke – number one, it is because of peer pressure; number two, because of imitation and modeling – one takes the first puff and once again, due to

cognitive interpretation, one can become a longtime addict or not. Again, going back to the watching of television – over time one begins to lose one’s sense of sympathy and empathy towards the sufferings of others. One could see the news of a bomb blast on TV and not have the slightest concern for the happenings of that event. It is very important to understand why this is happening and also to be aware of one’s growing insensitivity and how this can be counteracted. This is the reason why one needs the faculty of cognitive interpretation – to be aware that despite the insensitivity, one can still act positively in reaction to an event. It would be too narrow to say that one only learns negative and dangerous behaviours through modeling. One can also learn a number of positive things. For instance, there were cases where Bandura showed children who were afraid of dogs a seemingly brave person who could approach the animals without fear – this person was called the ‘Fearless Peer’. After observing the behaviour of this ‘brave’ person interacting with the animals, many of the children followed suit and made attempts to approach and even touch the dogs. They learnt to overcome their fear in a positive manner – all by observing the strong model that was not afraid of dogs. From this, one finds that we have to show our children the right models. In the classroom, children can learn that TV viewing needs to be regulated and too much of it can have a negative impact. At the same time, we ourselves should not indulge in viewing too much of negatively portrayed programs on TV – for instance, too much of violence. One has to fill one’s cognitive domain, increase one’s knowledge, expectations, mental dimension, and learn generally to perceive and acknowledge the things that are good and beautiful in the world.

### **END TITLES 21.01-21.36**

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### **MODULE TITLES**

MODULE 1: CHILDREN IMITATING THEIR ELDERS	(00.00-02.01)
MODULE 2: OBSERVATIONAL LEARNING	(02.02-02.52)
MODULE 3: THE THEORY OF OBSERVATIONAL LEARNING	(02.53-05.37)
MODULE 4: THE THEORY OF OBSERVATIONAL LEARNING	(05.38-08.09)
MODULE 5: KEY FACTORS THAT AFFECT OBSERVATIONAL LEARNING	(08.10-13.22)
MODULE 6: THE ROLE OF IDENTIFICATION IN OBSERVATIONAL LEARNING	(13.23-15.47)
MODULE 7: OBSERVATIONAL LEARNING AND AGGRESSION	(15.48-17.49)
MODULE 8: OBSERVATIONAL LEARNING AND SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR	(17.50-21.00)

### **OBJECTIVES**

There are a number of principles that govern the theory of observational learning. Its objectives can be a number of things: the observer imitates the model he or she finds attractive or desirable – thus, certain characteristics such as intelligence, good looks, power, popularity can affect behaviour that is guided by observational learning. The same can be said of negative characteristics as well – fears and phobias being the most efficacious instances. The observer also has a tendency to react to the way the model is treated along the lines of the model's behaviour. Thus, if the model's behaviour is rewarded, the observer has the tendency to reproduce the rewarded behaviour. There is a distinction between acquiring a certain kind of behaviour and performing the same – the

model's behaviour can be acquired through observation and this can be performed at a later stage if there is incentive enough to do so. Learning by observation involves four separate processes: *attention, retention, production and motivation*. Attention and retention constitute the acquisition or learning of a model's behavior; production and motivation control the performance. There is a complex interaction of a person, his or her behaviour and the environment. A person's behaviour can reciprocate itself inward in that it can affect his or her feelings about the self and his attitudes and beliefs with regards to others. This is also called reciprocal determinism. Of course, one has to remember that environment also plays a big role in shaping one's behaviour – parents, television, books, magazines, different social settings – the classroom, the office, the playground – all these sources can influence what a person does. In the same way, a person's behaviour also contributes to his or her environment.

### **CASE STUDY**

What role does observational learning play in the development of human social behaviour?

What is the impact of television in the behaviour of people, particularly young children and what role does it play in enhancing one's cognitive capabilities?

### **GLOSSARY**

Observation: The act of noticing or paying attention.

Aggression: A disposition to behave aggressively; a feeling of hostility that arouses thoughts of attack; violent action that is hostile and usually unprovoked; the act of initiating hostilities; deliberately unfriendly behaviour.

Reciprocate: Act, feel, or give mutually or in return.

Determinism: A philosophical theory holding that all events are inevitable consequences of antecedent sufficient causes; often understood as denying the possibility of free will.

Motivation: The psychological feature that arouses an organism to action toward a desired goal; the reason for the action; that which gives purpose and direction to behaviour.

Retention: The power of retaining and recalling past experience; the act of retaining something.

Attention: The process whereby a person concentrates on some features of the environment to the (relative) exclusion of others.

Production: The act or process of producing something.



Model: A hypothetical description of a complex entity or process; something to be imitated; someone worthy of imitation; worthy of imitation.

Vicarious: Experienced at secondhand.

Behaviour: Manner of acting or controlling yourself; the way a person behaves toward other people (behavioral attributes); the aggregate of the responses or reactions or movements made by an organism in any situation (psychology).

## **FAQs**

What is observational learning?

Observational learning, also known as social learning theory, takes place when an observer bases his or her behaviour according to what he or she has viewed to be the behaviour of a model. There can be positive or negative consequences that can affect the observer's behaviour – this is called vicarious reinforcement or vicarious punishment– of a model's behaviour. Albert Bandura (1925- ), the psychologist and eminent behaviourist is the main proponent of this theory.

What are the four separate processes involved in learning by observation?

Learning by observation consists of four separate processes: attention, retention, production and motivation.

Attention: Observers cannot learn unless they pay attention to what's happening around them. This process is influenced by characteristics of the model, such as how much one likes or identifies with the model, and by characteristics of the observer, such as the observer's expectations or level of emotional arousal.

Retention: Observers must not only recognize the observed behaviour but also be able to recall it at some later time. This process depends on the observer's ability to code or structure the information in an easily remembered form or to mentally or physically rehearse the model's actions.

Production: Observers must be physically and intellectually capable of producing the act. In many cases the observer possesses the necessary responses. But sometimes, reproducing the model's actions may involve skills the observer has not yet acquired. For instance, it is one thing to carefully watch a circus juggler, but it is quite another to go home and repeat those acts.

Motivation: In general, observers will perform the act only if they have some motivation or reason to do so. The presence of reinforcement or punishment, either to the model or directly to the observer, becomes most important in this process.

## **QUIZ**

Choose the correct option

The main proponent of observational learning is

- a) Albert Einstein
- b) Sigmund Freud
- c) Albert Bandura**
- d) William Shakespeare

The second process involved in learning by observation is

- a) motivation
- b) retention**
- c) attention
- d) imagination

Observational learning is also known as

- a) imitation
- b) social learning**
- c) both a) and b)
- d) None

## **TUTORIALS**

Video made as part of a kinesthetic activity demonstrating observational learning:  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=ljr3J0WkVoM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ljr3J0WkVoM)

Observational learning from video-based expert models in multimedia learning environments:  
[www.ou.nl/eCache/DEF/14/232.html](http://www.ou.nl/eCache/DEF/14/232.html);  
[www.onderzoekinformatie.nl/en/oi/nod/onderzoek/OND1297878](http://www.onderzoekinformatie.nl/en/oi/nod/onderzoek/OND1297878)

## **REFERENCES AND SOURCES**

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[social.jrank.org/pages/451/Observational-Learning.html](http://social.jrank.org/pages/451/Observational-Learning.html)

[psychology.about.com/od/developmentalpsychology/a/sociallearning.htm](http://psychology.about.com/od/developmentalpsychology/a/sociallearning.htm)

[www.ship.edu/~cgboeree/bandura.html](http://www.ship.edu/~cgboeree/bandura.html)

[www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/424027/observational-learning](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/424027/observational-learning)

## **IMAGES**

[http://teachvu.vu.msu.edu/public/designers/media\\_assets/influences.jpg](http://teachvu.vu.msu.edu/public/designers/media_assets/influences.jpg)

[http://www.minddisorders.com/images/gemd\\_02\\_img0070.jpg](http://www.minddisorders.com/images/gemd_02_img0070.jpg) (An example of observational learning)

<http://www.integralworld.net/images/edwards-5.gif>

<http://chiron.valdosta.edu/whuitt/images/aggmod.gif>

<http://chiron.valdosta.edu/whuitt/images/imitate.gif>

<http://www.integralworld.net/images/edwards-4.gif> (The learning cycle)

## **SUMMARY**

Observational learning, also known as: vicarious learning or social learning or modeling or ‘monkey see, monkey do’, is learning that occurs as a function of observing, retaining and, in the case of imitation learning, replicating behaviour executed by others. It is most associated with the work of psychologist Albert Bandura, who implemented some of the seminal studies in the area and initiated social learning theory. It involves the process of learning to copy or model the action of another through observing another doing it. Further research has been used to show a connection between observational learning and both classical and operant conditioning.

There are 4 key processes of observational learning: 1) Attention: To learn through observation, you must pay attention to another person's behavior and its consequences. 2) Retention: Store a mental representation of what you have witnessed in your memory. 3) Reproduction: Enacting a modeled response depends on your ability to reproduce the response by converting your stored mental images into overt behavior. 4) Motivation: Finally, you are unlikely to reproduce an observed response unless you are motivated to do so. Your motivation depends on whether you get benefits from responding that action.

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