Observational Learning

by Sophia Tutorial

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This tutorial will discuss observational learning. You will learn about:

1. Observational Learning
2. Modeling
3. Elements of Effective Observational Learning

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1. Observational Learning

📋 **BEFORE YOU START**

Recall that in psychology, learning refers to the internal as well as the external processes that result in changes in a person's behavior. There are two kinds of learning:

- Associative learning, which is learning different kinds of behaviors in response to the environment and the things going on around us.
- Cognitive learning, which is the internal mental process of thinking and understanding and constructing all these ideas and knowledge into things that we can use.

What about the role that other people can have on learning? To answer this question, you need to know about social learning. Social learning is a way to bridge the gap between associative and cognitive learning models. Social learning discusses how external people influence an individual's internal processes.

This tutorial will be about **observational learning**, which is learning by watching others' actions and the consequences of their actions, as well as imitating those actions later and showing that you did learn from that person and what they did.

↪ EXAMPLE Imagine a classroom full of young students taking a test. During the test, one student starts talking. The teacher comes over and gives this student a tap with a ruler. All of the other students within the classroom don't need to receive a similar smack by the teacher to understand that they shouldn't talk. They learn by observing the student and the consequences of that student's actions to know that they shouldn't talk during a test.

📄 **TERM TO KNOW**

Observational Learning

Learning by watching others and the consequences of their actions and imitating them

2. Modeling

So, what is the actual process of learning through observation? There are a few key elements.

The most important element of the observational learning process is a **model**. This model will provide an example of behavior, which the person will then observe.

⤳ EXAMPLE In the example of the test, the model is the student who speaks up during the test.

Models can come in many forms:

- They can be living people.
- They can be fictional people, such as characters in stories or fables, as long as you can learn from their behaviors to do the correct thing.
- They can be verbal instructions of behavior, because they help you create a model within your mind, like a code of conduct that you might receive.
- Learners generally tend to respond to models that are similar to them, because they're more able to actually do what the model is doing.

⤳ EXAMPLE If you are given an Olympic swimmer as a model for learning to swim, you are less likely to see that Olympian as being a model that's related to you, because you're likely not athletic to that degree of training. Therefore, this Olympian might not be as effective a model as someone more similar to you.

📄 **TERM TO KNOW**

Model
Someone or something that provides an example of behavior

3. Elements of Effective Observational Learning

There are four main elements that make an effective model:

1. *Attention*. You need to pay attention to the model. This means that you need to actually watch. If the model is interesting, you're more likely to actually see and remember what they're doing.

⤳ EXAMPLE When a teacher is a model, sometimes they can be a little boring and so we don't learn as much from them.

2. *Remembering*. You need to be able to remember. This means that you need to be able to store the information in your memory so that you can use it later, because a person doesn't necessarily have to perform the action immediately after they see their model in order to actually have learned it. This is what we refer to as **latent learning**.

⤳ EXAMPLE You might learn how to do a math problem during class, but you won't display that

knowledge until the teacher calls on you and offers you a reward or a good grade to actually do the math problem. You don't have to automatically perform actions in response to say that you've learned them.

3. *Reproduction*. You need to be able to reproduce the action. This means that you need to perform the action at some time to show that you have actually learned it. This is what we refer to as **imitation** of the model.

Imitation means that you perform an action in a similar way to what you observed within the model themselves. You're trying to approximate exactly what the model did to show that you know how to do it and can receive the same consequences.

4. *Motivation*. You need to *want* to perform the action. You might remember what you learned and be able to reproduce it later, but the reason why you reproduce it is that you're motivated to do so.

This relates to the reward and punishment idea, which can encourage the performance of a behavior. Indeed, reward and punishment of the model themselves can affect our motivation as well.

> ⤳ EXAMPLE In the previous example about the test, the student was reprimanded when he or she talked during the test. So the other students are less likely to perform the action of talking during a test, because they saw the consequences of the model's behavior.

📄 TERMS TO KNOW

Latent Learning
Learning that has occurred but you don't see until after a reinforcement has been offered

Imitation
Copying another's actions

☑ SUMMARY

Observational learning is learning by watching others' actions, through **modeling** and imitation. There are several **elements of effective observational learning** including attention, remembering, reproduction, and motivation.

Good luck!

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Erick Taggart.

📄 TERMS TO KNOW

Imitation
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Latent Learning
Learning that has occurred but you don't see until after a reinforcement has been offered.

Model

Someone or something that provides an example of behavior.

Observational Learning

Learning by watching others and the consequences of their actions and imitating them.