

Reading B: Learning through modeling

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One of the fundamental means by which new behaviors are acquired and existing patterns are modified entails modeling and vicarious processes. It is evident from informal observation that human behavior is to a large extent socially transmitted, either deliberately or inadvertently, through the behavioral examples provided by influential models [...] in many languages, “the word for ‘teach’ is the same as the word for ‘show’.

There are several reasons why modeling influences play a paramount role in learning in everyday life. When mistakes are costly or dangerous, skillful performances can be established without needless errors by providing competent models who demonstrate how the required activities should be performed. If learning proceeded solely through direct experience, most people would never survive their formative years because mistakes often result in fatal consequences. Some complex behaviors, of course, can be produced only through the influence of models. If children had no opportunity to hear speech, for example, it would be virtually impossible to teach them the linguistic skills that constitute a language. Where certain forms of behavior can be conveyed only by social cues, modeling is an indispensable aspect of learning. Even in instances in which it is possible to establish new skills through other means, the process of acquisition can be considerably shortened by providing appropriate models.

[...]

In technologically developed societies, behavior is usually modeled in a variety of forms. Much social learning is fostered through the examples set by individuals one encounters in everyday life. People also pattern their behavior after symbolic models they read about or see in audiovisual displays. As linguistic competencies are acquired, written accounts describing the actions and success of others can serve as guides for new modes of conduct. Another influential source of social learning, at all age levels, is the abundant and diverse modeling provided in television. Both children and adults can acquire attitudes, emotional responses, and complex patterns of behavior through exposure to pictorially presented models. Indeed, comparative studies [...] have shown that people can learn equal amounts from behavioral demonstration, pictorial representation, and verbal description, provided that they convey the same amount of response information, that they are equally effective in commanding attention, and that the learners are sufficiently adept at processing information transmitted by these alternative modes of representation. [...]

One of the early analyses of observational learning of aggression (Bandura, 1962; Bandura, Ross and Ross, 1963a) examined the relative potency of aggressive models presented in different forms. Nursery school children were matched individually in terms of their interpersonal aggressiveness and assigned to one of five conditions. One group observed adult models behaving aggressively toward the plastic figure. A second group saw a film of the same models performing the same aggressive acts [...] A third group observed the model costumed as a cartoon cat enacting the same aggressive responses on the screen of a television console. This condition was included to test the notion that the more remote the models

are from reality, the weaker is the tendency for children to imitate their behavior. In addition to the three modeling treatments, two control groups were included. The behavior of one group of children was measured without any prior exposure to the models to provide a baseline for the amount and form of aggression that children display in the same test situation when they have not experienced the modeling influence. It is conceivable that merely seeing the aggressive materials in the modeling situation could later increase children's use of them, quite apart from the model's actions. Therefore, in the fifth condition, the filmed models behaved in a calm, nonaggressive manner and did not handle the aggressive materials that were visibly displayed.

[...]

Results of this study show that exposure to aggressive models had two important effects on the viewers. First, it taught them new ways of aggressing. Most of the children who had observed the aggressive models later emulated their novel assaultive behavior and hostile remarks, whereas these unusual aggressive acts were rarely exhibited by children in the control groups. [...] Further analyses showed that a person displaying aggression on film was as influential in teaching distinctive forms of aggression as one exhibiting it in real life. The children were less inclined, however, to imitate the cartoon character than the real-life model.

[...] children who were exposed to the aggressive models subsequently exhibited substantially more total aggression than children in the nonaggressive model condition or the control group. Interestingly, the cartoon model served as a somewhat weaker teacher but an equally effective disinhibitor of aggression compared with the live and filmed counterparts. In addition, children who observed the nonaggressive adult displayed the restrained behavior characteristic of their model and expressed significantly less aggression than the no-model controls.

References for Reading B

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