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## MODULE 25

# Learning by Observation

## Module Preview

A type of learning that is important among higher animals is what Albert Bandura calls observational learning. Children tend to imitate what a model does and says, whether the behavior is prosocial or antisocial. Research suggests that violence on television leads to aggressive behavior by children and teenagers who watch the programs.

## Module Guide

### Introduction and Mirrors in the Brain

- ▶ Video: Program 7 of *Moving Images: Exploring Psychology Through Film: The “False Belief” Test: Theory of Mind*; Video Clip 11 of *Digital Media Archive: Psychology*, 1st ed.: *Bandura’s Bobo Doll Experiment*
- ▶ PsychSim 5: Monkey See, Monkey Do
- ▶ ActivePsych: *Digital Media Archive*, 2nd ed.: *Bandura on Social Learning With Clips From Original Experiment*

25-1. *Describe the process of observational learning, and discuss the role of mirror neurons in this type of learning.*

Among higher animals, especially humans, **learning** does not occur through direct experience alone. **Observational learning** also plays a part. The process of observing and imitating a specific behavior is often called **modeling**. **Mirror neurons**, located in the brain’s frontal lobes, demonstrate a neural basis for observational learning. Our brain’s mirror neurons underlie our intensely social nature.

### Bandura’s Experiments

25-2. *Describe Bandura’s findings on what determines whether we will imitate a model.*

Bandura believes that we imitate because of reinforcements and punishments—those received by the model as well as by the imitator. By watching others, we learn to anticipate a behavior’s consequences in situations like those we are observing. We tend to imitate models that we perceive as similar to us, successful, or admirable.

**Applications of Observational Learning**

- ▶ Lectures: Germans Who Helped Jews Escape; Observational Learning; Media Violence and Aggression; Parents and Television Watching
- ▶ Project: Acquiring a Skill Through Observation
- ▶ Instructor Video Tool Kit: *Do Video Games Teach People to Be Violent?*

25-3. *Discuss the impact of prosocial modeling and the relationship between watching violent TV and antisocial behavior.*

**Prosocial** models have prosocial effects. People who show nonviolent, helpful behavior prompt similar behavior in others. Models are most effective when their actions and words are consistent. Exposed to a hypocrite, children tend to imitate the hypocrisy by doing what the model does and saying what the model says.

Research indicates that much violence shown on television goes unpunished, is portrayed as justified, and involves an attractive perpetrator. These conditions provide a recipe for a *violence-viewing effect*. However, correlational studies that link viewing violence with violent behavior do not indicate the direction of influence. Those who behave violently may enjoy watching violence on TV, or some third factor may cause observers both to behave violently and to prefer watching violent programs. To establish cause and effect, researchers have designed experiments in which some participants view violence and others do not. Later, given an opportunity to express violence, the people who viewed violence tend to be more aggressive and less sympathetic. In addition to imitating what they see, observers may become desensitized to brutality, whether on TV or in real life.