**Social Learning Theory**

Social learning theory is a theory that attempts to explain socialization and its effect of the development of the self. There are many different theories that explain how people become socialized, including [psychoanalytic theory](http://psychology.about.com/od/developmentecourse/a/dev_psychoanaly.htm), functionalism, [conflict theory](http://sociology.about.com/od/Sociological-Theory/a/Conflict-Theory.htm), and [symbolic interaction theory](http://sociology.about.com/od/Sociological-Theory/a/Symbolic-Interaction-Theory.htm). Social learning theory, like these others, looks at the individual learning process, the formation of self, and the influence of society in socializing individuals.

Social learning theory considers the formation of one’s identity to be a learned response to social stimuli. It emphasizes the societal context of socialization rather than the individual mind. This theory postulates that an individual’s identity is not the product of the unconscious (such as the belief of psychoanalytic theorists), but instead is the result of modeling oneself in response to the expectations of others. Behaviors and attitudes develop in response to reinforcement and encouragement from the people around us. While social learning theorists acknowledge that childhood experience is important, they also believe that the identity people acquire is formed more by the behaviors and attitudes of others.

Social learning theory has it’s roots in [psychology](http://psychology.about.com/od/developmentalpsychology/a/sociallearning.htm) and was shaped greatly by psychologist [Albert Bandura](http://psychology.about.com/od/profilesofmajorthinkers/p/bio_bandura.htm). Sociologists most often use social learning theory to understand crime and deviance.

Social Learning Theory and Crime/Deviance

According to social learning theory, people engage in crime because of their association with others who engage in crime. Their criminal behavior is reinforced and they learn beliefs that are favorable to crime. They essentially have criminal models that they associate with. As a consequence, these individuals come to view crime as something that is desirable, or at least justifiable in certain situations. Learning criminal or [deviant behavior](http://sociology.about.com/od/Deviance/a/Sociological-Explanations-Of-Deviant-Behavior.htm) is the same as learning to engage in conforming behavior: it is done through association with or exposure to others. In fact, association with delinquent friends is the best predictor of delinquent behavior other than prior [delinquency](http://sociology.about.com/od/D_Index/g/Delinquency.htm).

Social learning theory postulates that there are three mechanisms by which individuals learn to engage in crime: differential reinforcement, beliefs, and modeling.

*Differential reinforcement of crime.*Differential reinforcement of crime means that individuals can teach others to engage in crime by reinforcing and punishing certain behaviors. Crime is more likely to occur when it 1. Is frequently reinforced and infrequently punished; 2. Results in large amounts of reinforcement (such as money, social approval, or pleasure) and little punishment; and 3. Is more likely to be reinforced than alternative behaviors. Studies show that individuals who are reinforced for their crime are more likely to engage in subsequent crime, especially when they are in situations similar to those that were previously reinforced.

*Beliefs favorable to crime.* On top of reinforcing criminal behavior, other individuals can also teach a person beliefs that are favorable to crime. Surveys and interviews with criminals suggest that beliefs favoring crime fall into three categories. First is the approval of certain minor forms of crime, such as gambling, “soft” drug use, and for adolescents, alcohol use and curfew violation. Second is the approval of or justification of certain forms of crime, including some serious crimes. These people believe that crime is generally wrong, but that some criminal acts are justifiable or even desirable in certain situations. For example, many people will say that fighting is wrong, however that it is justified if the individual has been insulted or provoked. Third, some people hold certain general values that are more conducive to crime and make crime appear as a more attractive alternative to other behaviors. For example, individuals who have a large desire for excitement or thrills, those who have a disdain for hard work and a desire for quick and easy success, or those who wish to be seen as “tough” or “macho” might view crime in a more favorable light than others.

*The imitation of criminal models*. Behavior is not only a product of beliefs and reinforcements or punishments that individuals receive. It is also a product of the behavior of those around us. Individuals often model or imitate the behavior of others, especially if it is someone that individual looks up to or admires. For example, an individual who witnesses someone they respect committing a crime, who is then reinforced for that crime, is then more likely to commit a crime themselves.