Social learning theory: choice of model

Not all models are equal

In social learning theory, behaviour is assumed to be learned from models. But mere exposure to a model does not guarantee that imitation will take place. Whether it does depends on a range of factors that influence the extent to which the observer will **attend** to a particular model and the **motivation** they may have to imitate the behaviour they observe. One factor is whether the observer perceives the model to be **similar** to her or himself. A second is whether the model is perceived as **attractive** or likeable. A third is whether the model has a high **status**. A fourth is whether the model is observed to be **reinforced** or punished for their behaviour. This complicates the issue of social learning as the probability that behaviour will be learned and imitated depends on three things: the model, te observer and the behaviour. This needs to be borne in mind when we look at some of the concerns people have about the influence of models.

Pop musicians are often criticised because they are believed to set 'a bad example' to others. The implication of this criticism is that people are likely to imitate unpleasant or harmful aspects of the musician's behaviour.

A case in point is Pete Doherty, who is criticised for the effect that his consumption of illegal drugs and his excessive drinking of alcohol may have on others. Those who are concerned about the effect of Doherty's behaviour tend to assume that anyone who is exposed to it is likely to imitate it. However, his actual influence is limited by several factors, as we can see if we examine his influence in terms of the factors outlined above.

First, those who perceive themselves as being similar to Doherty are more likely to imitate him. Similarity might be defined in terms of sex, age or ethnicity, so we might predict that young, Caucasian men are more likely to imitate him than other groups. However, there many additional dimensions along which similarity may be judged, so the fact that a person is young, white and male does not necessarily mean they will imitate him; they may not perceive themselves as similar if they come from Glasgow, since Doherty is associated with London.

Second, the likelihood of imitation is influenced by the attractiveness and likeability of the model. Whilst many admire Pete Doherty for his songwriting and performing, there are many aspects of his media portrayal that would render him unattractive as a model (see picture).

A third mediating factors is his status. Here, there are a number of features that would increase the likelihood of imitation: Doherty is famous, and held in high regard by some sections of society. Although he would not *universally* be perceived as having a high status, this is likely to be the case amongst those who also perceive themselves as being similar to him, whose probability of imitation is therefore increased.

The fourth factor to consider is the consequences of Doherty's behaviour. The picture here is complicated by the observers' perception of which consequence followed which behaviour. Some might perceive that Doherty has taken alcohol and other drugs to excess, behaved unpleasantly and has been rewarded with fame, adulation and financial success. Other might attribute the fame and money to his actions as a musician and connect his drug-taking antics as bringing the consequences of arrest, ill-health and public disapproval. Imitation of his behaviour might therefore be highly selective (e.g. joining a band, learning guitar) and which behaviour is selected for imitation would depend heavily on how its consequences were perceived.

Analysing Pete Doherty's behaviour in terms of social learning theory, then, suggests that whilst he may exert a negative influence on some people's behaviour, this is far from inevitable and likely to be limited as a result of the many factors that mediate between observation and imitation of behaviour.