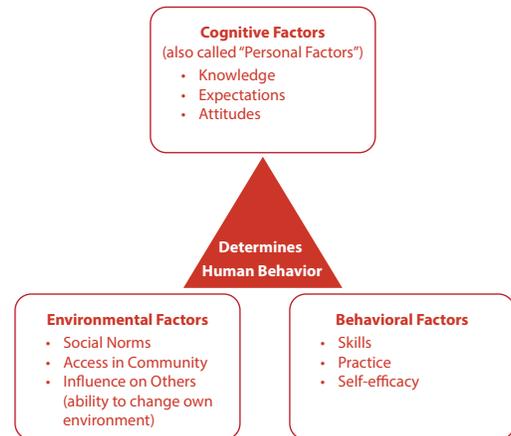


WHAT IS SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY?

Social (or Observational) Learning Theory stipulates that people can learn new behaviors by observing others. Earlier learning theories emphasized how people behave in response to environmental stimuli, such as physical rewards or punishment. In contrast, social learning emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between social characteristics of the environment, how they are perceived by individuals, and how motivated and able a person is to reproduce behaviors they see happening around them. People both influence and are influenced by the world around them.

According to Social Learning Theory, people learn by:

- **Observing** what other people do
- **Considering** the apparent **consequences** experienced by those people
- **Rehearsing** (at first mentally) what might happen in their own lives if they followed the other peoples' behavior
- **Taking action** by trying the behavior themselves
- **Comparing** their experiences with what happened to the other people
- **Confirming** their belief in the new behavior



WHEN SHOULD SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY BE USED?

The principles of social learning can be applied to almost any social and behavior change communication (SBCC) program that aims to influence social behaviors, particularly behaviors that are complex or involve interactions with other people. It may be especially useful when a particular behavior is difficult to describe, but can be explained through demonstration or modeling. Also, when adopting or practicing a particular behavior requires overcoming barriers or challenges, social learning principles can be used to demonstrate how a person can overcome those challenges and succeed. Finally, because people tend to adopt and practice behaviors they see others doing, social learning principles can be used to change perceptions of the social environment, making behaviors seem more common and providing social support to people who are considering a behavior change.

WHAT SHOULD IMPLEMENTERS KNOW?

The most important concepts of social learning theory are **modeling**, **efficacy** and **parasocial interaction**.

Modeling in an SBCC program refers to the use of messages that show someone (a real person or an actor) performing a desirable behavior. Observational learning from a model requires four cognitive stages: attention, retention, reproduction and motivation.

- **Attention:** Individuals must be paying attention to the model in order to learn something new. This has important implications for SBCC programming: programs and messages with models must be engaging, tailored to local context, understandable and interesting for the intended audience(s).
- **Retention:** Individuals must be able to "store" new information about the modeled behavior and review it later. This can be done by ensuring that the model is memorable or by handing out materials that SBCC program participants can review after an event is over. It also might involve something like organizing listening groups or group discussions after a radio drama that reinforce the new behaviors that were described.
- **Reproduction:** Individuals have to re-enact the new behavior in order to practice and master it themselves. Repeated performance of the behavior will lead to sustained change. SBCC programs can be evaluated in part by

measuring whether or not people try to replicate the modeled behavior and then continue to practice it over time.

- *Motivation*: For reproduction of the behavior to be successful, individuals need to be properly motivated to perform it themselves. SBCC can increase motivation by showing the characters in a message being successful or by encouraging members of the community to share their experiences so that others can learn from their success.

Models can be positive (doing the right thing and being rewarded) or negative (doing the wrong thing and suffering the consequences), however research shows that negative models are less likely than positive models to motivate behavior change. Modeling a positive outcome for a person who finds out their HIV status (receiving support from friends) is more motivating than modeling a negative outcome (falling ill) for a person who refuses to be tested.

Efficacy describes a feeling of personal empowerment or confidence in one's ability to perform a particular behavior. Efficacy increases with experience, either direct personal experience or vicarious experience. Vicarious experience can be gained by observing the success or failure of real people or by becoming cognitively and emotionally involved with fictional characters or models who succeed.

Parasocial interaction takes place when people begin to identify with and think of fictional characters as if they were real people. Social learning theory can help program designers identify the types of characters that most attract the audience, the benefits of a behavior that people value, and the types of stories that give people increased confidence in their ability to perform a behavior and achieve those benefits.

Intersexions Explores Sexual Networks to Promote HIV Prevention Behaviors

Intersexions was a South African entertainment-education television series about sex, love, and relationships, and how secrets within those relationships can place individuals at risk for HIV infection. The first season aired in 2010 and was viewed by over 4 million South Africans, won multiple entertainment awards and quickly became the most watched drama series in the country.

Observational learning from the series was enhanced through discussions on ten radio stations, a blog featuring weekly updates on the story and its characters, and social networking through Facebook and Twitter. In 2011, the Centre for AIDS Development, Research and Evaluation (CADRE), conducted an evaluation of the impact of the series on viewer's lives and health outcomes. The evaluation found, among other things, that viewers felt that Intersexions represented true-to-life situations, that viewers identified strongly with specific characters and storylines, and that the show promoted discussion among families and friends. Respondents to the evaluation reported taking concrete steps to change or modify their behavior in line with what they had seen characters do on the show, particularly when it came to consistent condom usage and undergoing HIV testing and counseling. An evaluation of the impact of the show's 23,000 Facebook fans and 2,300 Twitter followers found that use of these platforms extended dialogue about the series among viewers, contributing to the diffusion of the ideas and behaviors promoted by the show.

A second season of Intersexions aired in 2013 to continue promoting important models of HIV risk-reduction behavior through entertainment-education to viewers in South Africa. **More on Season Two.**



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