Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory (SLT) suggests that new behaviors can be acquired through observing, modeling, and imitating the behavior of others. Through observation, people form ideas about how the new behavior is performed, which serves as a guide to performing the behavior.

Key principals of SLT:
- Learning involves observation, extracting information from those observations, and making decisions about performing the behavior (*observation learning* or *modeling*).
- Learning can occur by observing a behavior and the consequences of the behavior (*vicarious reinforcement*).
- Learning can occur without an observable change in behavior.
- The learner is not a passive recipient of information. Cognition, environment, and behavior all mutually influence each other (*reciprocal determinism*).

SLT outlines three types of models of observational learning (not represented in the figure below): live model (an individual demonstrates a behavior), symbolic model (real or fictional characters demonstrate behaviors in media formats such as books, film, and online), and verbal instructional model (description of the behavior and instruction on how to perform it).

SLT recognizes four cognitive and affective factors that mediate the process of determining whether a new behavior is acquired: attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation.
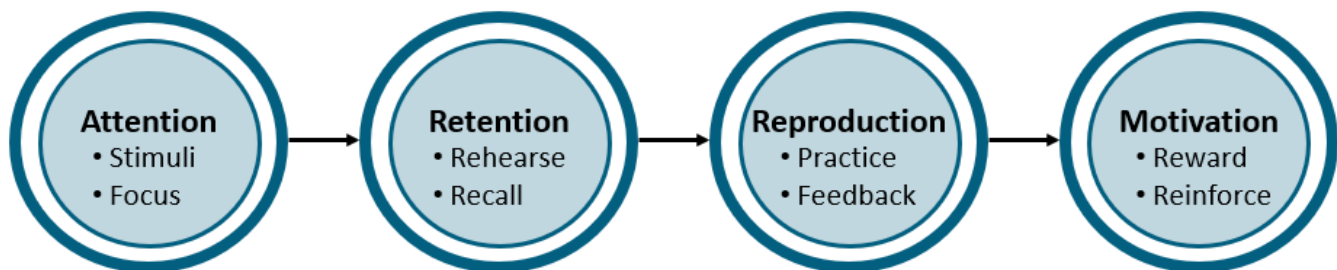
Developer

Albert Bandura, 1977

Graphical Representation of Theory and Constructs
(Adapted from Bandura, 1977)

Observational Learning/Modeling Process

Attention
- Stimuli
- Focus

Retention
- Rehearse
- Recall

Reproduction
- Practice
- Feedback

Motivation
- Reward
- Reinforce

Attention – The degree to which a behavior is noticed. Attention is influenced by characteristics of the behavior (e.g., relevance, novelty, functional value) and the observer (e.g., cognitive and perceptual ability, arousal).

Retention – The degree to which the features of a behavior are remembered. Retention is influenced by characteristics of the behavior (e.g., complexity) and the observer (e.g., cognitive capabilities and rehearsal).

Reproduction – An individual's physical and cognitive ability to perform the behavior.

Motivation – The will to reproduce a behavior based on external reinforcement, self-reinforcement, and/or vicarious reinforcement *(observing the consequences (rewards and punishments) of the behavior for other people).*

Application to the Precision Paradigm: Alignment of Theory Constructs with Mechanisms of Action Taxonomy

Mechanisms of Action (MoA), derived from theories of behavior, are the processes through which specific intervention techniques are expected to affect behavior. Interventions grounded in Social Learning Theory might include techniques to achieve specific changes in behavior by acting through any of these MoAs.

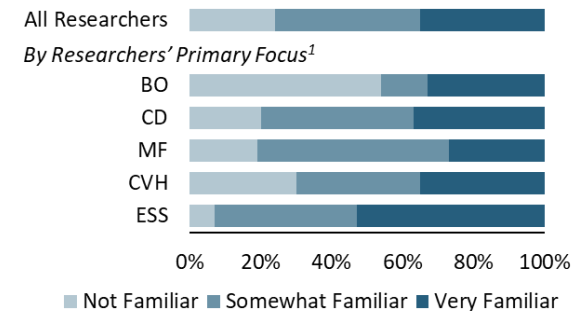Aspects of constructs in **Social Learning Theory** correspond to the Mechanisms of Action taxonomy as follows:

Theory Construct	Corresponding Mechanism(s) of Action
Observational Learning/Modeling	Social Learning/Imitation
Attention	Memory, Attention and Decision Processes
Retention	Memory, Attention and Decision Processes
Reproduction	Skills
	Behavioral Regulation
Motivation	Motivation
	Beliefs about Consequences
	Reinforcement

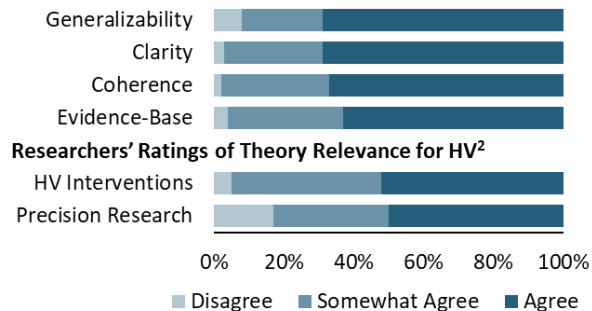## Examples of Use of Theory in Intervention Development/Research

O'Connor, T. G., Matias, C., Futh, A., Tantam, G., & Scott, S. (2013). Social learning theory parenting intervention promotes attachment-based caregiving in young children: Randomized clinical trial. *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology*, *42*(3), 358-370. https://doi.org/10.1080/15374416.2012.723262

Key Results from Intervention Researcher Survey

Researchers' Familiarity with the Theory
All Researchers
By Researchers' Primary Focus[1]
BO
CD
MF
CVH
ESS
Not Familiar ■ Somewhat Familiar ■ Very Familiar

Researchers' Ratings of Theory Quality[2]
Generalizability
Clarity
Coherence
Evidence-Base
Researchers' Ratings of Theory Relevance for HV[2]
HV Interventions
Precision Research
Disagree ■ Somewhat Agree ■ Agree
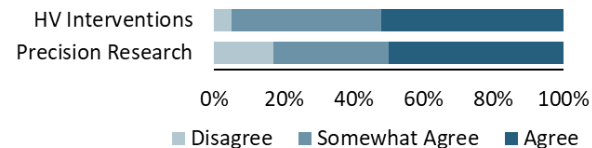
High Quality[3] 60%
High Relevance[4] 53%
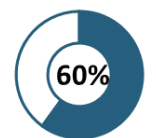
[1]Intervention researchers' primary or secondary area of research; BO=Birth Outcomes; CD=Child Development; MF=Maternal Psychosocial Functioning; CVH=Cardiovascular Health; ESS=Family Economic Self-Sufficiency
[2]Of those who indicated they were familiar with the theory. Those answering 'Not Sure' to the quality and relevance items were excluded from the denominator.
[3]Percent of researchers answering agree/somewhat agree to all four quality items.
[4]Percent of researchers answering agree/somewhat agree to both relevance items.

Methods for the intervention researcher survey can be found here.

Theory Citations

Bandura A. (1971). *Social learning theory.* General Learning Press.
Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Prentice-Hall.