# A Social Cognitive Account of Role Modelling: Responding to Wynne

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According to Wynne (1989a), the "most important way teachers communicate morality is by being role models" (p. 12). Moreover, Wynne (1986, 1989a, 1989b, 1989c) places this educational practice within a developmental perspective that emphasizes social learning theory, where adults transmit morality to largely passive children who absorb (learn) the socially correct moral precepts and imitate socially correct moral conduct. I emphasize the term passive, as opposed to active, for Wynne opposes social cognitive and moral developmental theories, such as proposed by Kohlberg, that emphasize the child's active construction of knowledge and the importance of reasoning and understanding in a child's life. Thus Wynne's perspective leads to a challenging question: Are we committed to accepting Wynne's overall developmental and educational views if we accept, in agreement with Wynne, that role models have shaped our own moral lives, and continue to do so, and that our own example shapes the moral life of others, particularly our children and students? Or, rephrasing this question more generally: Is the educational practice that emphasizes the importance of an adult role model at odds with social cognitive principles that emphasize the development of a child's understanding and reasoning? In this essay, I will suggest not by providing a brief social cognitive account of role modelling.

A partial account can be drawn from the work of James Mark Baldwin, writing around the turn of the century. According to Baldwin (1897/1973), there are three circular processes (which Baldwin also conceptualizes as stages) in a child's developing sense of self: the projective, subjective, and ejective. In the initial projective process a child does not distinguish self from other, but blindly copies or obeys others, without understanding. In the complementary subjective process, the child makes the projective knowledge his own by interpreting the projective imitative copy within, where "into his interpretation go all the wealth of his earlier informations, his habits, and his anticipations" (p. 120). From this basis, the child in the third process then ejects his subjective knowledge onto others, and "reads back imitatively into them the things he knows about himself" (p. 418). In other words, through the projective process the child in effect says, "What others are, I must be"; through the ejective process, the child in effect says, "What I am, others must be." Between both, the subjective serves a transformative function in what Baldwin calls generally the dialectic of personal growth.

The important point here is that while imitation plays a central role in Baldwin's theory, it is not passive. Rather, a child's knowledge "at each new plane is also a real invention. . . . He makes it; he gets it for himself by his own action; he achieves, invents it" (p. 106). Thus emerging from this perspective is a conception of the child as an active constructor of social reality. Through imitation, the child reflects on the resulting actions in light of preexisting knowledge, understandings, and values, and transforms or, put in Piagetian terms, structures through a process of assimilation and accommodation the initially external stimulus. (For a comprehensive analysis of Baldwin and imitation from a cognitive developmental perspective, see Kohlberg, 1969.)

This conception of the child as an active constructor of knowledge helps account for the all too numerous instances where children do not directly replicate the predominant social environment. To take an illustrative example, consider observational data presented by Anna Freud (cited in Radke-Yarrow, Zahn-Waxler, & Chapman, 1983) regarding the peer interactions of orphaned German-Jewish pre-school-age children brought to English hostels during World War II. These children lived through brutal circumstances in Germany (at a minimum losing both their parents). From a social-learning perspective, the horrendous environment in which these children lived would lead to a prediction that these children would demonstrate anti-social traits. However, daily logs kept on the children document their high level of generosity, sympathy, and helpfulness to one another.

In more controlled and scientific settings, numerous studies have looked for direct correspondences between a child's actions and those of an adult who modelled such acts as donating to a charity. After an extensive review of this social learning literature by Radke-Yarrow et al. (1983), they concluded that while modelling has sometimes shown to have a direct effect, "the amount of donating after observing a model is often quite low, and not all children adopt the model's behavior . . . and in fact some children act counter to the behavior of the model" (p. 502). Moreover, there are indications that when role modelling effects are found they are neither generalized nor long lasting (Grusec, 1981; Rushton, 1981). Thus emerging from this body of research is support for the proposition that children recognize and interpret the complex situational factors that make virtually every social situation unique, and children plan and adjust their conduct accordingly.

More informally, I take this proposition to be in agreement with our general sensibility. Consider, for instance, the effects of television. Most of us have likely grown up having witnessed hundreds if not thousands of television programs that depict and sometimes applaud a protagonist (and thus a potential role model) who burglarizes or murders. But it is even more likely that none of us has committed such acts. That is, presumably we believe that when we watch such programs, we can interpret the depicted acts in ways that prevent us from replicating them: for example, we distinguish what does occur from what we think ought to occur, fact from fantasy, reality from story, and so forth. We also largely give children credit for such abilities. For, by and large, we consider children to have a significant degree of free will that leads to intentional behavior for which they are held accountable. Thus, not surprisingly, juries have consistently rejected arguments by defence lawyers who have attempted to place the blame of a violent crime not on the young person who committed it, but on the violent television programs that purportedly caused the child to act violently.

To be clear, I am not saying that role models do not affect children. They do. And I agree with Wynne that teachers should aim to be good role models. But I am arguing that the developmental mechanism by which such role modelling shapes a child is not that of a direct instilling or transmission, nor can the child be viewed as largely passive and non-cognitive. Thus the choice is not between role modelling or not, but between developmental theories — between social learning and social cognitive. And though beyond the scope of this essay (for more detail, see DeVries & Goncu, 1987; Friedman, 1989; Power, 1988), it is this choice that so much influences teacher practices and classroom organization. Note, for instance, that based on a social learning perspective, Wynne (1989b, p. 2) believes

teachers should seek "simple obedience from young persons" and that while teachers may wish to provide reasons for their demands, by and large reasons and justifications "merely serve as a form of intellectual courtesy." In contrast, from a social cognitive perspective I have suggested that reasons and justifications fundamentally help children as they seek moral coherence and understanding in the course of directing their conduct. ■

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