

Is Toga Wearing Contagious?

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An Explanation of Social Cognitive Theory via *Animal House*

By Raymond Schneider

Animal House is a 1978 movie that is still popular, particularly among college students. The movie is about the adventures of two freshmen fraternity members. Alcohol use is prominent in the movie, and anecdotal evidence suggests watching *Animal House* encourages binge drinking. Research evidence is mixed, though. It seems that some people binge drink after watching *Animal House*, but others don't.

Do we have any tools that can help explain how *Animal House* might influence college students? One way to answer this question is to walk through the viewing experience that is *Animal House*, and explore the movie via the stages of Social Cognitive Theory.

We can probably assume that someone sits down to watch *Animal House* either because they want to, or because they are coerced in some way to watch the film. To broadly summarize *Animal House*, after roughly two hours of images of debauchery, drinking, and questionable romantic endeavors, some of the characters end up with decent lives and some do not. Most likely the viewer will be left with the iconic scenes such as John Belushi shouting "Toga! Toga! Toga!", or one of the various party sequences in the film. At this point Social Cognitive Theory posits that we have seen a set of behaviors and will begin assessing the images and behaviors through the four main learning capabilities SCT is based on.

The first learning ability, **self-regulation**, states that we have motivations for engaging in behaviors, and when examples of behaviors are presented to us, we must evaluate those behaviors based on our motivations. A viewer watching *Animal House* will see a wide range of behaviors they have already contemplated or decided not to engage in. Many college students do plan on drinking heavily in college and engaging in many casual relationships. If this is the case, the behaviors in *Animal House* will match quite closely with the motivations the viewer already has. A viewer who is not a college student, or who finds binge drinking or casual sex to be poor behaviors will not find much in the film to counter these beliefs. Social Cognitive Theory holds that whatever our motivations may be, we will compare what we see in *Animal House* to those motivations we already hold.

Now our viewer has had an initial reaction to *Animal House*, but wonders briefly how this depiction of college students compares to their own friends and others they know who attend college or engage in the behaviors on display in the film. This second stage of learning is coined **self-reflection**. Perhaps in one viewer the self-reflection stage consists of thinking "That looks a lot like last Friday night. We do that all the time!". Another may see the film and think "I cannot imagine myself or my friends ever pretending to shoot a horse or have sex in the middle of a stadium." If the viewer finds herself in the middle of the

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spectrum, she may consult her friends, asking if they saw the film, and what those friends thought of it. All of these actions are examples of self-reflection upon the behaviors displayed.

In addition to viewing *Animal House* through her own motivations and in light of her reflections on the film, our *Animal House* viewer may also find certain parts of the movie to resonate on a deeper level. Perhaps the "COLLEGE" t-shirt or the overbearing dean strikes a chord in our viewer that the behaviors in the film do not. This is the impact of **symbolization**. Further, maybe our viewer has never been to college, but is going to be attending soon and finds the behaviors acceptable in theory, and the film acts as primer of sorts, mentally preparing her to engage in the activities shown. In Social Cognitive Theory this is the concept of **vicarious learning**, practicing activities without having actual engaged in them.

Assuming our viewer has gone through these stages of observational learning, she may find the behaviors acceptable both internally and in the context of friends, has been impacted by the imagery of the film, and finds the film instructional on how to engage in the behaviors. In this way she has begun **modeling** the behaviors. She believes she can realistically engage in the behaviors, mentally reproducing them, and is now motivated to engage in the behaviors when presented with the opportunity. On the other hand, this process could be stalled at any of the above stages for a variety of reasons. Social Cognitive Theory does not tell us who will and will not view *Animal House* and become a binge drinking, toga wearing frat boy, but it does give us a detailed framework, observational learning, to analyze how various parts of our mind and social surroundings can influence and be influenced by the behaviors we see.