18.5: Cognitive Aspects of Social Learning Theory- The Contributions of Julian Rotter and Walter Mischel

Julian Rotter deserves at least as much credit as Albert Bandura for the establishment of social learning theory. Indeed, his book *Social Learning & Clinical Psychology* (Rotter, 1954) was published five years before Bandura’s *Adolescent Aggression* (Bandura & Walters, 1959). In addition, Rotter always focused on cognitive aspects of social learning, something Bandura gave more consideration to only later in his career. But their careers were by no means separated from one another. Walter Mischel was Rotter’s graduate student, and later joined the faculty of Stanford University where he was a colleague of Bandura. Mischel and Bandura collaborated on some of Mischel’s best known research: delayed gratification.

Brief Biography of Julian Rotter

Julian Rotter was born in 1916 in Brooklyn, NY. The son of successful Jewish immigrants, his childhood was quite comfortable. During the Great Depression, however, the family business failed, and for a few years the family struggled (as many people did). This time of struggle instilled in Rotter a profound sense of social justice, as well as an interest in the effects of situational environments.

As a child Rotter was an avid reader, and eventually he read most of the novels in the local library. He then turned to reading books on psychology, taking a particular interest in works by Freud and Adler. During his senior year in high school he was interpreting people’s dreams and he wrote a paper based on Freud’s *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (Freud, 1904/1995). He attended Brooklyn College, but chose to major in chemistry instead of psychology, as it seemed more likely to provide a promising career. During college, however, he learned that Adler was teaching at the Long Island College of Medicine. He began attending Adler’s seminars, became Adler’s friend, and was invited to meetings of the Society for Individual Psychology. Another well-known psychology professor who influenced Rotter was Solomon Asch. When he graduated from Brooklyn College, he actually had more credits in psychology than in chemistry.
Rotter attended the University of Iowa, where he earned a Master’s Degree in 1938, and then took a clinical internship at the Worcester State Hospital in Massachusetts. A year later he began working on his Ph.D. at Indiana University, because a professor there, C. M Louttit, had published one of the first books advocating clinical psychology as a career. Rotter received his Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology in 1941. After a short period of time at Norwich State Hospital in Connecticut, Rotter was drafted into the Army. He spent World War II working as a military psychologist. After the war he briefly returned to Norwich, but soon Rotter accepted a position at Ohio State University.

It was during his time at Ohio State University that Rotter developed his ideas on social learning theory. He and George Kelly were the two most prominent members of the psychology department, each of them having a lasting influence in the fields of social and cognitive learning theory. Rotter attracted many excellent graduate students, including Walter Mischel. Rotter was also keenly interested in the training of clinical psychologists, and he helped to outline the training model that became the basis for how doctoral level clinical psychologists are trained today.

As much as he enjoyed his time at Ohio State University, Rotter left in 1963 to direct the rebuilding of the clinical psychology training program at the University of Connecticut. He retired as professor emeritus in 1987. One year later he received an American Psychological Association’s Distinguished Scientific Contribution Award, and one year after that he was recognized by the Council of University Directors of Clinical Psychology with their Distinguished Contribution to Clinical Training Award. He has also worked with the Peace Corps. Rotter included a brief autobiography in his self-edited compendium entitled The Development and Applications of Social Learning Theory (Rotter, 1982).

**Brief Biography of Walter Mischel**

Walter Mischel was born in 1930, into a comfortable home, where he enjoyed a pleasant childhood. They lived in Vienna, a short distance from Sigmund Freud’s house. However, when the Nazis invaded Austria at the beginning of World War II, the Mischel family moved to the United States, eventually settling in New York City. In college, Mischel studied to become a social worker. While working as a social worker in the Lower East Side slums, Mischel attended City College of New York and pursued a graduate degree in clinical psychology. He had been taught that Freud’s theory offered the best explanation of human behavior, but he did not find this to be true in his work with juvenile delinquents (the same practical conclusion occurred to Carl Rogers in his first clinical position).

He then attended Ohio State University, where he was a graduate student of both Julian Rotter and George Kelly. Rotter and Kelly helped to firmly establish Mischel as a member of the general social learning/cognitive learning camp, and later Mischel became a faculty member at Stanford University, alongside Albert Bandura (from 1962-1983). He then returned to New York as a faculty member at Columbia University, where he continued his work on delayed gratification and the effects of situations on personal behavior. Mischel has been recognized with a Distinguished Scientific Contribution Award by the American Psychological Association.

**Placing Rotter and Mischel in Context: Cognitive Social Learning Theory**

The distinction between Bandura as a social learning theorist, and Rotter and Mischel as cognitive learning theorists, is not entirely accurate. As Bandura’s career progressed, he focused more and more on cognitive factors, and Mischel collaborated with Bandura while both were at Stanford University. What distinguishes Rotter and Mischel is that cognitive factors were always the most important aspect of their learning theories. Although humans are capable of...
learning simply by watching a model, their expectations regarding the outcome of a situation, and the value the place on the potential reward (or punishment), determines their course of action. According to Mischel, these variables can lead to seemingly inconsistent behavior, but when examined in closer detail individuals demonstrate consistent patterns of variation, a form of consistency in itself.

Rotter and Mischel can also be seen as having encompassed Bandura’s career. Although all three men were active during the same general time frame, Rotter’s first book on social learning theory preceded Bandura’s first book by 5 years. Mischel, a student of Rotter, and then a colleague of Bandura for a while, has continued to modify his most influential theory quite recently, in the 1990s and 2000s.

Rotter and Mischel can also be considered as providing a bridge between the more traditional social learning theory of Bandura and the full-fledged cognitive theory of George Kelly. Kelly was Rotter’s colleague at Ohio State University, and Mischel studied under both men while in graduate school. Thus, social learning theory, cognitive social learning theory, and cognitive theories of personality development all occurred in close relationship to one another, and they all offered a dramatic alternative to radical behaviorism, an alternative that helped to fulfill the vision of John Dollard and Neal Miller.