



Review

Gaining insight to transfer of training through the lens of social psychology

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ABSTRACT

The article deals with the question under which conditions people change their behavior through vocational trainings or not. Following the demand of more theory-driven investigations in transfer research (Blume, Ford, Baldwin, & Huang, 2010) we wish to add the perspective of social psychology. We therefore illustrate how well-known concepts from social psychology hold untapped potential to improve transfer research by explaining the underlying mechanisms of factors that support (or hinder) the transfer of newly trained behavior and skills on the job. In choosing social psychological theories that have so far only scarcely been considered with regard to explaining training transfer we combine them with well known concepts in transfer research. We give furthermore hints for implications and tools to foster transfer in practice.

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1. Introduction

This paper presents key elements and theories of social psychology linking them to established theories of transfer of training. In order to advance transfer research and to meet demands in forms of more theory-driven substantive issues

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(e.g. Blume et al., 2010) we try to explain several phenomena in the transfer process from a social psychological viewpoint. We think that especially social psychologists theories are suitable for training transfer and it is worth to have a deeper look on them. The explanatory effort and goal of this paper is to go beyond and complement existing transfer theories. We additionally hope to shed light onto the question under which conditions will individuals change their behavior through vocational trainings, secondly. Third, we will explain why social psychology applied to training transfer can help explaining the transfer gap.

We are basing our thematic review on Lewin's (1951) approach seeing behavior as a function of person and environment – an approach that can already be found in several frameworks of training transfer (e.g. Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Kirwan & Birchall, 2006). With Lewin's approach as the main direct of impact in our review, we will focus in more detail on specific aspects of the person and the environment.

Personal and situational variables decide about the transfer process on the first side. From learning theory (Bandura, 1986) we already know about two further factors: skills for behavioral pattern as sine qua non. But transferring also needs intensifiers to foster the trained content in the performance repertoire. The selection of presented theories comprises on the one hand theoretical assumptions that are already well established in transfer research, but whose impact is so important that they could not be neglected (e.g. goal setting theory). On the other hand, we chose some social psychological theories that have so far only scarcely been considered with regard to explaining training transfer (e.g. cognitive dissonance, social identity). Still, they might provide promising explanations when answering the question why social psychologists theories are especially suitable for training transfer.

In general there is empirical evidence that positive transfer of vocational training in the organizational context takes place (Taylor, Russ-Eft, & Taylor, 2009). Ford and Weissbein (1997) defined transfer as the application, generalizability and maintenance of newly acquired knowledge and skills. Transfer occurs if the new knowledge is used on the job it was intended for. We refer to this transfer approach called as the 'conventional school' of transfer in contrast to workplace learning as newer approach, for example (Cheng & Hampson, 2008). Training transfer is also often defined as the extent to which what is learned in training is applied on the job and enhances job-related performance (Laker & Powell, 2011). In our review we broaden this transfer concept by the following way. People that were trained can change on the one hand their attitudes, values and also intentions for particular behavior pattern. And on the other hand they also change concrete intentions and plan and practice strategies for implementation. Most important transfer is not a singular act and needs to be rehearsed. As the device says: Said is not heard, heard is not understood, understood is not agreed, agreed is not memorized, memorized is not applied and applied is not maintained. This whole process should be part of every training in that way that people can understand the content in a way that they agree with it and can train it in the training itself and also afterwards.

The most prominent factors – trainee variables, training design and work environment variables – have been intensively studied in combination with effective transfer of training (e.g. Kirwan & Birchall, 2006). Researchers tended on the one hand to study the complexity of single variables in much detail (e.g. Holladay & Quiñones, 2003; Tziner, Haccoun, & Kadish, 1991). On the other hand they developed extensive transfer models to capture the process as a whole (e.g. Cheng & Hampson, 2008; Colquitt, LePine, & Noe, 2000; Holton, 1996). Whereas research gets closer to identify the meaning of single variables for the transfer process, it still remains unclear which mechanisms are underlying and which dynamism is inherent in the whole process.

The field of psychology as a science centered on understanding and predicting human behavior seems to be one possibility to learn more about how people change their behavior through training. Social psychology, in particular, considers human behavior in the context of its social environment and tries to observe, explain and predict how situational variables influence human behavior. Nevertheless there is only little conjunction between training transfer researchers as stated above on the one hand and social psychologists' studies on the other hand. This is on the one hand not surprising because concepts and empirical findings cannot be generalized from the laboratory (where social psychologists often do studies) to a training context. But as Gehlbach (2010) stated "new research needs to assess which applications of social psychological principles transfer" (p. 359). Additionally, the transfer process is inherent in a social context and therefore we want to allow a deeper understanding of training transfer by looking at it from a more interactional perspective.

Further on we think that social psychology applied to the training transfer can help explaining the transfer gap especially for soft-skills training. Laker and Powell (2011) argue for a differentiation between hard-skills (technical) and soft-skills training (intrapersonal and interpersonal) in their extent to which each transfers to the job. They declaim different factors (like training resistance to learning or immediacy and salience of feedback and consequences) showing that soft-skills training is less likely to transfer from training to the job than hard-skills training. These different factors can be explained by social psychologist phenomena's and we hope to add more insight to the transfer process by illuminating them.

Taking this as a starting point, this article illustrates how applying concepts from social psychology to training transfer research holds untapped potential to better understand underlying mechanisms and as a consequence develop and improve tools to foster transfer. Instead of attempting to catalog the universe of social psychological concepts, our article focuses on few selected examples. These examples illustrate the breadth of social psychology with potential implications for transfer. Therefore, these examples serve as prototypes that might influence and foster ideas for other novel applications of social psychological principles for transfer of training. To elaborate the question of relevant person-related factors and the question what characterizes a workplace as "transfer-friendly", we highlight factors that support (or hinder) the transfer of newly trained behavior and skills on the job and link them to theories from the field of social and group psychology. We review

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