

Albert Bandura: Social Cognitive Theory of Human Functioning

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Bandura is best known for his work with **observational learning**. His early work focused on **social learning and aggression**. He was interested in looking at aggression in boys – comparing those that came from disadvantaged homes to those that came from “good homes” in “good neighborhoods.” He was familiar with the research that suggested that aggression grows out of frustration and that boys from broken homes and “bad” neighborhoods were more aggressive – because of the added frustration brought on by poverty and poor parenting. He however had a difficult time explaining why boys from intact homes in wealthy neighborhoods became aggressive. He discovered that these overly aggressive privileged boys had parents who were verbally aggressive and **modeled** their hostile attitudes for their sons. The well off boys learned aggression by listening to their parents. These parents did not hit, kick, or physically attack people – but their words, attitudes, and parenting style encouraged aggression. The boys were taught to stand up for themselves and to never back down from a fight. When the teenage boys got in trouble at school – the parents always took the child’s side and aggressively belittled the school, teachers, and other students. When the schools tried to punish the boys for being aggressive – the parents rewarded it and continued to model aggression in the home (Bandura, 2006).

Bandura continued his work on observational learning of aggression with his **Bobo doll experiment**. A Bobo doll is an inflatable punching bag – painted to look like a person. Some of the children watched an adult punch, kick, and shoot a toy gun at the doll. Other children watched a **nonviolent model**. When the children were given an opportunity to play with the doll – the ones who had witnessed violence acted violently. The children who watched a nonviolent model played much less aggressively with the doll (Pajares, 2004). His experiment demonstrated that children learn aggression by watching other people be aggressive.

When you look back at Bandura’s own childhood, you can see that he learned much from watching his parents. He was born in a tiny town in eastern Canada and was the only boy – he had 5 sisters. His parents were both immigrants. His father from Poland, his mother from the Ukraine. Both parents worked hard – his father building the railroad and his mother in the town’s small store. Plus, everyone in the family worked to clear and farm their land. Neither parent had any formal education, but both parents taught their children to value education. Bandura’s father taught himself to read three languages, was active in the local school, and played the violin. His mother helped to nurse neighbors in need. Life was hard – but learning, helping others, and hard work were always encouraged.

Bandura attended the town’s small school. It had two teachers who taught all the grades. Students were encouraged to learn and study on their own. In the summer, Bandura worked as a carpenter, and after high school spent a summer helping to repair the Alaska Highway. After high school he attended the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. His parents had given him the choice of college or farming. Bandura continued to work as a carpenter, and at first took any class that would fit around his work schedule. He started to take psychology courses because they met at the right time – but was soon hooked and decided to major in psychology. He became a firm believer that chance events can have a

positive impact on your life – if you look at them as opportunities and use them for self-improvement (Stokes, 2004).

Bandura did his graduate work at the University of Iowa – even in the 1940s it was known for having a strong psychology department. Because Bandura was from Canada, he was not eligible for work study jobs or scholarships, so he continued to work odd jobs as a carpenter to pay his way. He focused his studies on modeling and imitation – how people learn about their culture and social norms by watching other people. Bandura also loved to play golf, and met his wife [Virginia] in a sand trap. Virginia was a nursing instructor at the college. The two moved frequently as Bandura finished his PhD and moved to Kansas and then California (Bandura, 2006).

By the 1980s, Bandura had more fully developed his theory and renamed it: **social cognitive theory of human functioning**. (Spiegler, 1983) He was looking not just at observational learning, but also at how a person's thoughts influenced their ability to adapt and change. He believed that people were active learners – and active thinkers. People reflect upon their actions, they motivate themselves to work, and are able to regulate their own emotions. He thought that people could **self-direct**. They could plan, organize, and set goals. He knew that humans rarely lived in isolation, and that most people interacted frequently with others. He felt that the people you surround yourself with could shape your sense of worth, your belief in your own abilities, and your life goals. He stressed that humans are plastic – or flexible. He felt that the human ability to change and adapt was key to success and happiness.

One of Bandura's big theories centers on **self-efficacy**. Self-efficacy is a person's belief that they are able to complete tasks or meet goals. It is another term for confidence. Your self-efficacy will influence what types of goals you set and how long and hard you will work to reach those goals. Self-efficacy is task specific (Bandura, 1997). I have high self-efficacy when it comes to baking a lemon meringue pie or sewing a quilt – but I have low self-efficacy when it comes to fixing my car or becoming a ballet dancer. Self-efficacy is also situational and can change when certain challenges arise. I am confident I can bake a lemon meringue pie at home in my kitchen with my oven. I am less sure that I could bake one on a camping trip in a Dutch oven over an open fire.

People with a low sense of self-efficacy in a task will give up quickly. I won't tinker with my car for very long when it is not running right. I quickly give up and call a tow truck. But, if I run into problems sewing a quilt, I will work for months on one quilt. I won't give up – because I believe I can make it work.

There are four primary ways to develop self-efficacy beliefs: (Bandura, 1994)

1. **Performance accomplishments**. Whenever you complete a task – and complete it well – your self-efficacy for that task rises. If I bake a lemon meringue pie and it turns out perfect, my belief in my cooking skills rise. But, if I bake a lemon meringue pie and the topping turns out all runny and filling is lumpy, my self-efficacy falls. Success helps to create a sense of self-efficacy, and failure destroys it.
2. **Vicarious experience**. Watching someone else complete a task effectively gives you a model to copy. If you see the model be successful, you believe that you could be successful too. If you see

a model fail, you doubt that you could do any better. I learned to bake by watching my mother. She baked pies every Saturday – and they were almost always perfect.

3. **Verbal persuasion.** If another person encourages you to try and gives you constructive feedback – efficacy has a chance to increase with each successful attempt. My mother encouraged me to bake. She was often in the kitchen giving advice like “Don’t put your fingers in the electric beater. Don’t drop any egg shells in the bowl.” Having a positive mentor can help overcome self-doubt.
4. **Physiological states.** Feelings, physical reactions, and stress levels may affect how you feel about your actions. Being nervous decreases self-efficacy. Being relaxed increases it. Getting yelled at or rushed can decrease self-efficacy. Feeling in control can increase it. Baking is what I do when I want to relax – the smells, tastes, and sounds all remind me of home. I doubt that I would feel very confident baking on any of the current TV shows – where people yell, judge, and everything is rushed.

Bandura is now in his 80s and still working – he also takes time away with his family to travel, listen to opera, and drink wine. He feels that happiness should not be left to chance – but pursued actively.

References

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