Albert Bandura: Summarized

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Albert Bandura was born December 4, 1925, in the small town of Mundare in northern Alberta, Canada. He was educated in a small elementary school and high school in one, with minimal resources, yet a remarkable success rate. After high school, he worked for one summer filling holes on the Alaska Highway in the Yukon.

He received his bachelors degree in Psychology from the University of British Columbia in 1949. He went on to the University of Iowa, where he received his Ph.D. in 1952. It was there that he came under the influence of the behaviorist tradition and learning theory.

While at Iowa, he met Virginia Varns, an instructor in the nursing school. They married and later had two daughters. After graduating, he took a postdoctoral position at the Wichita Guidance Center in Wichita, Kansas.

In 1953, he started teaching at Stanford University. While there, he collaborated with his first graduate student, Richard Walters, resulting in their first book, Adolescent Aggression, in 1959.

Bandura was president of the APA in 1973, and received the APA's Award for Distinguished Scientific Contributions in 1980. He continues to work at Stanford to this day.

Theory

Behaviorism, with its emphasis on experimental methods, focuses on variables we can observe, measure, and manipulate, and avoids whatever is subjective, internal, and unavailable -- i.e. mental. In the experimental method, the standard procedure is to manipulate one variable, and then measure its effects on another. All this boils down to a theory of personality that says that one's environment causes one's behavior.

Bandura found this a bit too simplistic for the phenomena he was observing -- aggression in adolescents -- and so decided to add a little something to the formula: He suggested that environment causes behavior, true; but behavior causes environment as well. He labeled this concept reciprocal determinism: The world and a person's behavior cause each other.

Later, he went a step further. He began to look at personality as an interaction among three "things:" the environment, behavior, and the person's psychological processes. These psychological processes consist of our ability to entertain images in our minds, and language. At the point where he introduces imagery, in particular, he ceases to be a strict behaviorist, and begins to join the ranks of the cognitivists. In fact, he is often considered a "father" of the cognitivist movement!

Adding imagery and language to the mix allows Bandura to theorize much more effectively than someone like, say, B. F. Skinner, about two things that many people would consider the "strong

suit" of the human species: observational learning (modeling) and self-regulation.

Observational learning, or modeling

Of the hundreds of studies Bandura was responsible for, one group stands out above the others -- the bobo doll studies. He made of film of one of his students, a young woman, essentially beating up a bobo doll. In case you don't know, a bobo doll is an inflatable, egg-shape balloon creature with a weight in the bottom that makes it bob back up when you knock him down. Nowadays, it might have Darth Vader painted on it, but back then it was simply "Bobo" the clown.

The woman punched the clown, shouting "sockeroo!" She kicked it, sat on it, hit with a little hammer, and so on, shouting various aggressive phrases. Bandura showed his film to groups of kindergartners who, as you might predict, liked it a lot. They then were let out to play. In the play room, of course, were several observers with pens and clipboards in hand, a brand new bobo doll, and a few little hammers.

And you might predict as well what the observers recorded: A lot of little kids beating the daylights out of the bobo doll. They punched it and shouted "sockeroo," kicked it, sat on it, hit it with the little hammers, and so on. In other words, they imitated the young lady in the film, and quite precisely at that.

This might seem like a real nothing of an experiment at first, but consider: These children changed their behavior without first being rewarded for approximations to that behavior! And while that may not seem extraordinary to the average parent, teacher, or casual observer of children, it didn't fit so well with standard behavioristic learning theory. He called the phenomenon observational learning or modeling, and his theory is usually called social learning theory.

Bandura did a large number of variations on the study: The model was rewarded or punished in a variety of ways, the kids were rewarded for their imitations, the model was changed to be less attractive or less prestigious, and so on. Responding to criticism that bobo dolls were supposed to be hit, he even did a film of the young woman beating up a live clown. When the children went into the other room, what should they find there but -- the live clown! They proceeded to punch him, kick him, hit him with little hammers, and so on.

All these variations allowed Bandura to establish that there were certain steps involved in the modeling process:

1. Attention. If you are going to learn anything, you have to be paying attention. Likewise, anything that puts a damper on attention is going to decrease learning, including observational learning. If, for example, you are sleepy, groggy, drugged, sick, nervous, or "hyper," you will learn less well. Likewise, if you are being distracted by competing stimuli.

Some of the things that influence attention involve characteristics of the model. If the model is colorful and dramatic, for example, we pay more attention. If the model is attractive, or prestigious, or appears to be particularly competent, you will pay more attention. And if the model seems more like yourself, you pay more attention. These kinds of variables directed Bandura towards an examination of television and its effects on kids!

2. Retention. Second, you must be able to retain -- remember -- what you have paid attention to. This is where imagery and language come in: we store what we have seen the model doing in the form of mental images or verbal descriptions. When so stored, you can later "bring up" the image or description, so that you can reproduce it with your own behavior.

3. Reproduction. At this point, you're just sitting there daydreaming. You have to translate the images or descriptions into actual behavior. So you have to have the ability to reproduce the behavior in the first place. I can watch Olympic ice skaters all day long, yet not be able to reproduce their jumps, because I can't ice skate at all! On the other hand, if I could skate, my performance would in fact improve if I watch skaters who are better than I am.

Another important tidbit about reproduction is that our ability to imitate improves with practice at the behaviors involved. And one more tidbit: Our abilities improve even when we just imagine ourselves performing! Many athletes, for example, imagine their performance in their mind's eye prior to actually performing.

4. Motivation. And yet, with all this, you're still not going to do anything unless you are motivated to imitate, i.e. until you have some reason for doing it. Bandura mentions a number of motives:

past reinforcement, ala traditional behaviorism.
promised reinforcements (incentives) that we can imagine.
vicarious reinforcement -- seeing and recalling the model being reinforced.

Notice that these are, traditionally, considered to be the things that "cause" learning. Bandura is saying that they don't so much cause learning as cause us to demonstrate what we have learned. That is, he sees them as motives.

Of course, the negative motivations are there as well, giving you reasons not to imitate someone:

past punishment.
promised punishment (threats).
vicarious punishment.

Like most traditional behaviorists, Bandura says that punishment in whatever form does not work as well as reinforcement and, in fact, has a tendency to "backfire" on us.

Self-regulation

Self-regulation -- controlling our own behavior -- is the other "workhorse" of human personality. Here Bandura suggests three steps:

Self-observation. We look at ourselves, our behavior, and keep tabs on it.
Judgment. We compare what we see with a standard. For example, we can compare our performance with traditional standards, such as "rules of etiquette." Or we can create arbitrary ones, like "I'll read a book a week." Or we can compete with others, or with ourselves.
Self-response. If you did well in comparison with your standard, you give yourself rewarding self-responses. If you did poorly, you give yourself punishing self-responses. These self-responses can range from the obvious (treating yourself to a sundae or working late) to the more covert (feelings of pride or shame).

A very important concept in psychology that can be understood well with self-regulation is self-concept (better known as self-esteem). If, over the years, you find yourself meeting your standards and life loaded with self-praise and self-reward, you will have a pleasant self-concept (high self-esteem). If, on the other hand, you find yourself forever failing to meet your standards and punishing yourself, you will have a poor self-concept (low self-esteem).

Recall that behaviorists generally view reinforcement as effective, and punishment as fraught with problems. The same goes for self-punishment. Bandura sees three likely results of excessive self-punishment:

compensation -- a superiority complex, for example, and delusions of grandeur.
inactivity -- apathy, boredom, depression.
escape -- drugs and alcohol, television fantasies, or even the ultimate escape, suicide.

These have some resemblance to the unhealthy personalities Adler and Horney talk about: an aggressive type, a compliant type, and an avoidant type respectively.

Bandura's recommendations to those who suffer from poor self-concepts come straight from the three steps of self-regulation:

Regarding self-observation -- know thyself! Make sure you have an accurate picture of your behavior.
Regarding standards -- make sure your standards aren't set too high. Don't set yourself up for failure! Standards that are too low, on the other hand, are meaningless.
Regarding self-response -- use self-rewards, not self-punishments. Celebrate your victories, don't dwell on your failures.

Therapy

Self-control therapy

The ideas behind self-regulation have been incorporated into a therapy technique called self-control therapy. It has been quite successful with relatively simple problems of habit, such as smoking, overeating, and study habits.

Behavioral charts. Self-observation requires that you keep close tabs on your behavior, both before you begin changes and after. This can involve something as simple as counting how many cigarettes you smoke in a day to complex behavioral diaries. With the diary approach, you keep track of the details, the when and where of your habit. This lets you get a grip on what kinds of cues are associated with the habit: Do you smoke more after meals, with coffee, with certain friends, in certain locations...?
Environmental planning. Taking your lead from your behavioral charts and diaries, you can begin to alter your environment. For example, you can remove or avoid some of those cues that lead to your bad behaviors: Put away the ashtrays, drink tea instead of coffee, divorce that smoking partner.... You can find the time and place best suited for the good alternative behaviors: When and where do you find you study best? And so on.
Self-contracts. Finally, you arrange to reward yourself when you adhere to your plan, and possibly punish yourself when you do not. These contracts should be written down and witnessed (by your therapist, for example), and the details should be spelled out very explicitly: "I will go out to dinner on Saturday night if I smoke fewer cigarettes this week than last week. I will do paperwork instead if I do not."
You may involve other people and have them control your rewards and punishments, if you aren't strict enough with yourself. Beware, however: This can be murder on your relationships, as you bite their heads off for trying to do what you told them to do!

Modeling therapy

The therapy Bandura is most famous for, however, is modeling therapy. The theory is that, if you can get someone with a psychological disorder to observe someone dealing with the same issues in a more productive fashion, the first person will learn by modeling the second.
Bandura's original research on this involved herpephobics -- people with a neurotic fear of snakes. The client would be lead to a window looking in on a lab room. In that room is nothing but a chair, a table, a cage on the table with a locked latch, and a snake clearly visible in the cage. The client then watches another person -- an actor -- go through a slow and painful approach to the snake. He acts terrified at first, but shakes himself out of it, tells himself to relax and breathe normally and take one step at a time towards the snake. He may stop in the middle, retreat in panic, and start all over. Ultimately, he gets to the point where he opens the cage, removes the snake, sits down on the chair, and drapes it over his neck, all the while giving himself calming instructions.

After the client has seen all this (no doubt with his mouth hanging open the whole time), he is

invited to try it himself. Mind you, he knows that the other person is an actor -- there is no deception involved here, only modeling! And yet, many clients -- lifelong phobics -- can go through the entire routine first time around, even after only one viewing of the actor! This is a powerful therapy.

One drawback to the therapy is that it isn't easy to get the rooms, the snakes, the actors, etc., together. So Bandura and his students have tested versions of the therapy using recordings of actors and even just imagining the process under the therapist's direction. These methods work nearly as well.

Discussion

Albert Bandura has had an enormous impact on personality theory and therapy. His straightforward, behaviorist-like style makes good sense to most people. His action-oriented, problem-solving approach likewise appeals to those who want to get things done, rather than philosophize about ids, archetypes, actualization, freedom, and all the many other mentalistic constructs personologists tend to dwell on.

Among academic psychologists, research is crucial, and behaviorism has been the preferred approach. Since the late 1960's, behaviorism has given way to the "cognitive revolution," of which Bandura is considered a part. Cognitive psychology retains the experimentally-oriented flavor of behaviorism, without artificially restraining the researcher to external behaviors, when the mental life of clients and subjects is so obviously important.

This is a powerful movement, and the contributors include some of the most important people in psychology today: Julian Rotter, Walter Mischel, Michael Mahoney, and David Meichenbaum spring to my mind. Also involved are such theorists of therapy as Aaron Beck (cognitive therapy) and Albert Ellis (rational emotive therapy). The followers of George Kelly also find themselves in this camp. And the many people working on personality trait research -- such as Buss and Plomin (temperament theory) and McCrae and Costa (five factor theory) -- are essentially "cognitive behaviorists" like Bandura.

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