

Social Learning Theory: How We Observe and Shape Behavior

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Albert Bandura

Albert Bandura (born December 4, 1925, in Mundare, Alberta, Canada) is a psychologist and the David Starr Jordan Professor Emeritus of Social Science in Psychology at Stanford University. Over a career spanning almost six decades, Bandura has been responsible for groundbreaking contributions to many fields of psychology, including social cognitive theory, therapy and

personality psychology, and was also influential in the transition between behaviorism and cognitive psychology. He is known as the originator of social learning theory and the theory of self-efficacy, and is also responsible for the influential 1961 Bobo Doll experiment.

A 2002 survey ranked Bandura as the fourth most-frequently cited psychologist of all time, behind B.F. Skinner, Sigmund Freud, and Jean Piaget, and as the most cited living one. Bandura is widely described as the greatest living psychologist, and as one of the most influential psychologists of all time. In 2008 Bandura won the Grawemeyer Award in Psychology.

Research

Bandura was initially influenced by Robert Sears' work on familial antecedents of social behavior and identificatory learning, Bandura directed his initial research to the role of social modeling in human motivation, thought, and action. In collaboration with Richard Walters, his first doctoral student, Bandura engaged in studies of social learning and aggression. Their joint efforts illustrated the critical role of modeling in human behavior and led to a program of research into the determinants and mechanisms of observational learning.

Social Learning Theory

The initial phase of Bandura's research analyzed the foundations of human learning and the propensity of children and adults to imitate behavior observed in others. (It is a common mistake, even among psychologists, to confuse the words 'imitate' and 'model.' For example, a child patterns, but does not 'model' his behavior after someone else; he displays or imitates new behavior acquired by observing a model.)

Analysis of aggression

Bandura's research with Walters led to his first book, *Adolescent Aggression* in 1959, and to a subsequent book, *Aggression: A Social Learning Analysis* in 1973. During a period dominated by behaviorism in the mold of B.F. Skinner, Bandura believed the sole behavioral modifiers of reward and punishment in classical operant conditioning were inadequate as a framework, and that many human behaviors were learned from other humans. Bandura began to analyze means of treating unduly aggressive children by identifying sources of violence in their lives. Initial research in the area had begun in the 1940s under Neal Miller and John Dollard; Bandura's continued work in this line eventually culminated in the Bobo doll experiment, and in 1977's enormously influential treatise, *Social Learning Theory*. Many of Bandura's innovations came from his focus on empirical investigation and reproducible investigation, which were alien to a field of psychology dominated by the theories of Freud.

The Bobo Doll experiment

In 1961 Bandura conducted a controversial experiment known as the Bobo doll experiment, to study patterns of behavior, at least in part, by social learning theory, and that similar behaviors were learned by individuals shaping their own behavior after the actions of models. The experiment was criticized by some on ethical grounds, for training children towards aggression. Bandura's results from the Bobo Doll Experiment changed the course of modern psychology, and were widely credited for helping shift the focus in academic psychology from pure behaviorism to cognitive psychology. The experiment is among the most lauded and celebrated of psychological experiments.

Social cognitive theory

By the mid-1980s, Bandura's research had taken a more holistic bent, and his analyses tended towards giving a more comprehensive overview of human cognition in the context of social learning. The theory he expanded from social learning theory soon became known as social cognitive theory.

Social Foundations of Thought and Action

In 1986, Bandura published *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory* (see article), in which he reconceptualized individuals as self-organizing, proactive, self-reflecting, and self-regulating, in opposition to the orthodox conception of humans as governed by external forces. Bandura advanced concepts of triadic reciprocity, which determined the connections between human behavior, environmental factors, and personal factors such as cognitive, affective, and biological events, and of reciprocal determinism, governing the causal relations between such factors. Bandura's emphasis on the capacity of agents to self-organize and self-regulate would eventually give rise to his later work on self-efficacy.

Self-efficacy

In 1963 Bandura published *Social Learning and Personality Development*. In 1974 Stanford University awarded him an endowed chair and he became David Starr Jordan Professor of Social Science in Psychology. In 1977, Bandura published the ambitious *Social Learning Theory*, a book that altered the direction psychology took in the 1980s.

In the course of investigating the processes by which modeling alleviates phobic disorders in snake-phobics, Bandura found that self-efficacy beliefs (which the phobic individuals had in their own capabilities to alleviate their phobia) mediated changes in behavior and in fear-arousal. He then launched a major program of research examining the influential role of self-referent thought in

psychological functioning. Although he continued to explore and write on theoretical problems relating to myriad topics, from the late 1970s he devoted much attention to exploring the role that self-efficacy beliefs play in human functioning.

In 1986 Bandura published *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory* (see article), a book in which he offered a social cognitive theory of human functioning that accords a central role to cognitive, vicarious, self-regulatory and self-reflective processes in human adaptation and change. This theory has its roots in an agentic perspective that views people as self-organizing, proactive, self-reflecting and self-regulating, not just as reactive organisms shaped by environmental forces or driven by inner impulses. *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control* was published in 1997.

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