Bandura, Albert

US psychologist. Bandura is best known as a social-learning theorist whose research established the concept of imitation, or modelling, on a firm empirical base. His major works include Social Learning and Personality Development (1963), and Aggression: A Social Learning Analysis (1973).

Albert Bandura (1925–), a pioneering theorist of social cognitive therapeutic interventions leading to development of personal agency, is cited widely by counselors and psychotherapists. His social learning theory, later known as social cognitive theory, evolved from an initial interest in social models' impact on children's aggression, to modeled interventions for phobias, to enhancing patients’ self-efficacy beliefs and use of self-regulatory processes.

Bandura was born on December 4, 1925, in a rural hamlet in northern Alberta, Canada. He was the only son in a family of six children of Ukrainian and Polish heritage. His early educational experiences were conducted in an eight-room school with only two high school teachers and few instructional resources. This often led to a reversal of teacher and student roles, and Bandura and his classmates had to develop their own academic skills, which they accomplished with considerable success. Defying conventional expectations, all members of his self-study group attained collegiate degrees. Bandura achieved recognition as an undergraduate at the University of British Columbia by receiving the Bolocan Award in Psychology, the first of many honors in his storied career. These formative educational experiences led to his view of learning and adaptive functioning as a social and self-directed process.

After completing his doctorate at the University of Iowa, Bandura accepted a faculty appointment at Stanford University, where he began to study the social and familial causes of aggression with his doctoral student Richard Walters. They found that children whose parents modeled aggressive attitudes and punitive modes of social control in the family showed greater aggression toward their classmates in school. To test a hypothesis of vicarious learning of aggression along with a contrasting Freudian hypothesis based on catharsis, Bandura and two doctoral students, Dorrie and Sheila Ross, conducted experiments using the now classic inflated Bobo doll. According to a catharsis hypothesis, children's identification with a modeled aggressor vicariously diminishes their aggressive drives and reduces their aggressive behavior. These researchers found that young children who viewed an aggressive model attack the Bobo doll in novel ways displayed higher levels of aggression than those in a no-model control group. These findings conflicted with the catharsis hypothesis. Exposure to an aggressive model increased aggression rather than decreased it. Furthermore, the children readily learned novel forms of aggression vicariously without performing them behaviorally or receiving rewards for imitation. These outcomes conflicted with instrumental conditioning views of social learning. This evidence that witnessing vicarious violence increased children's aggression attracted the attention of U.S. congressional committees that were investigating the impact of televised violence on children's aggression during the 1960s.

Bandura's first comprehensive description of his theory was presented in a 1977 book titled Social...
Learning Theory. It depicted human functioning triadically—involving reciprocal interactions between (1) personal (cognitive-affective), (2) behavioral, and (3) environmental components. People are both producers and products of their environments, and the effects of cognitive processes on behavior are also bidirectional. This formulation could explain not only observers’ reactions to social models in the environment but also observers’ cognitive beliefs and preventive behavior designed to regulate their exposure to models. In a 1986 text, Bandura extended his theory to cover emerging research on self-efficacy beliefs and self-regulatory processes. Self-efficacy involved individuals’ prospective judgments of their capabilities to perform at certain levels, such as to solve a specific math problem. Self-efficacy was assessed using task-specific rating scales, which made them sensitive to variations in task difficulty and to the effects of therapeutic interventions. These dynamic item properties differentiated self-efficacy measures from trait measures of self-confidence and led to the former’s widespread predictive power. Bandura identified three self-regulatory subfunctions: (1) self-observation, (2) self-evaluation, and (3) self-reactions. For example, overweight persons could observe and record their weight daily, set goals, and self-evaluate their progress toward them, and then self-react by altering their diet or levels of exercise. Because of Bandura’s increasing focus on these cognitive and self-regulatory issues and because diverse researchers had also labeled their theories as “social learning,” Bandura renamed his theory as “social cognitive.”

In 1997, Bandura published a book that greatly expanded the role of self-efficacy in social cognitive theory. Research on these beliefs had extended into diverse fields of functioning, such as education, health, clinical problems, athletics, and social and political change. Clearly, self-efficacy theory could be adapted successfully to a wide variety of areas. He also studied self-efficacy beliefs as they operate in social systems, such as schools, medical clinics, and athletic teams. This collective efficacy referred to a group’s shared beliefs about members’ combined capabilities to achieve certain goals. This measure could be used to identify problematic groups as well as specific practices that undermine a staff’s collective efficacy, such as poor coaching practices. Bandura also described the four sources of self-efficacy information: (1) vicarious experience, (2) enactive mastery experience, (3) verbal persuasion, and (4) influences from physiological and affective states. For example, a therapeutic intervention for test-anxious students might involve watching a skilled model demonstrate and verbally encourage students to emulate a test preparation strategy and gradually enacting the strategy on their own. The strategy could comprise affective and cognitive components, such as relaxation and memorization.

In a 2006 journal article, Bandura placed research on self-efficacy beliefs and self-regulation in a broader social cognitive framework, which he labeled “human agency.” This construct refers to personal efforts to control one’s functioning and life circumstances, and its core properties are (a) intentions, (b) forethought, (c) self-reactions, and (d) self-reflection. Bandura cautioned that agentic intentions are not vague inclinations to act, but instead, they concern specific action plans and strategies for carrying out those plans. A graduate student experiencing serious procrastination problems in writing her thesis might self-record the number of words written during each session. The second core property of an agent, forethought, refers to goals and the anticipated outcomes of prospective actions to guide and motivate goal attainment. The graduate student could set daily goals for word production and plan to monitor changes in output. The third core property, self-reactions, refers to one’s ability to construct appropriate courses of action and to motivate and self-regulate their execution. The graduate student could motivate herself by engaging in rewarding activities when 50% of her daily word goal is achieved. The fourth core property, self-reflection, refers to one’s skill in self-examining one’s functioning. This includes self-reflecting on one’s personal efficacy, the effectiveness of one’s thoughts and actions, the
ultimate meaning of one's pursuits, and one's corrective adjustments—if necessary. The graduate
student might discover that her writing production was higher at the library than at home and could
decide to reduce potential distractions from her home or to write exclusively at the library.

Bandura's social cognitive theory has had a major impact on clinical applications. Social modeling, self-
regulation, and agentic self-beliefs are widely used to prevent and modify varied types of psychological
disorders. Bandura and two doctoral students, Edward Blanchard and Bruni Ritter, developed a highly
effective participant modeling approach in which patients observed a skilled model approach and
handle the feared threat, followed by enactive efforts to imitate the model in graduated steps. In
contrast to a no-treatment control group and a desensitization alternative treatment group, the
participant modeling group was more effective in reducing lifelong fears and terrifying nightmares.
After the intervention, the participants expressed their gratitude for curing their phobias. They
reported another important outcome: a profound sense that they can exercise greater control over
their lives. This outcome Bandura would later measure formally using self-efficacy scales.

A 2002 survey ranked Bandura as the most widely cited living psychologist. In addition to the
application of his social cognitive theory in psychology, it is widely cited in adjacent fields, such as
health, medicine, education, athletics, and communication. In a book he is completing, he extends social
cognitive theory to the exercise of moral agency. Among his many awards, he was elected president of
the American Psychological Association, and he received its highest research award for Distinguished
Contributions. He also received the William James Award, the highest research award of the American
Psychological Society, and the E. L. Thorndike Award for his contributions in education. He was given
Distinguished Contribution awards by the Clinical Psychology Division of the American Psychological
Association, the International Society for Research on Aggression, and the Society of Behavioral
Medicine. He has been elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the Institute of
Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences. He is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and 20
honorary degrees from American and foreign universities.

See also Behavior Modification; Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy; Mahoney, Michael J.; Meichenbaum,
Donald; Social Cognitive Theory

Further Readings

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